

Lavender and Yellow by listlessness

Series: [Screening Lavenders \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/F, Gummi Bears, Lesbian Sex, M/M, also lots of wheeler sibling feels, baked ziti, ballerina!nancy, bisexual!kali, could be read as romantic friendship vibes, level five gay, like a lot of it, strong nancy/jonathan friendship, the magical discovery of homosexuality

Language: English

Characters: Holly Wheeler, Jonathan Byers, Kali Prasad, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington

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Summary:

Nancy had always been looking for a world outside Hawkins, something to escape the monotony of a small town with the occasional incidental interdimensional hell portal. Sometimes, though, doors come wrapped up in packages of black hair and butterflies that give electrical kisses.

Lavender and Yellow

Author's Note:

So I started writing this after quite badly injuring myself to the point of essentially literal immobility. That's the way this stuff always starts. But I'm a sucker for rarepairs, and I'm a sucker for femslash, and I haven't written anything like it in, oh, ten years. Being forced to literally put my feet up for 6+ weeks has helped.

This characterisation of Nancy could be read as an extension of another fic I wrote, [One-Hit Wonder \(With Two\)](#), but this is by no means a companion piece. There's a lot of Nancy's character I find curious or strange in the show, and a lot I like to imagine about it.

I'm also very, very tempted to write a companion piece to this about Steve and Jonathan's relationship, and I've already got a skeleton structure to it.

It was Mike who first brought her up. Nancy hadn't been paying attention. Normally she'd be doing her homework in her bedroom, but she was working on a poster for geography, and she hated risking getting glue in the carpet. Mike had still overtaken the basement as his own domain, despite the fact he and his friends hadn't had a *Dungeons and Dragons* session since the start of September. It was nearing Thanksgiving now, and Nancy was getting fed up at having to work on this damn poster in the garage.

She hadn't heard him the first time. Her fingers were covered in glue and glitter, two things she hated almost as much as hellish, interdimensional landscapes, and she'd already gone through three sheets of card. She hated geography, and she almost wished she hadn't swapped to it from civics. Mike's voice had cut through her griping reverie, and she turned with a yelp; that was another thing she couldn't stand. People sneaking up on her.

'What?'

'El's sister. She's in town. Can we have her over for dinner?'

Three pieces of information, all with different weight. Nancy hadn't considered the implications or weight of it all at the time. All that she cared about was that she could have been writing an essay on the three arms of government right then, instead of trying to get the texture of igneous rock right in the medium of various craft supplies. She eyeballed Mike and then looked back at the house with an impassive look.

'Where's Mom?'

Mike shrugged. It was an open secret that their mother wasn't home much any more. Even if she was, her mind was elsewhere, otherwise preoccupied. Nancy wished she could mentally escape like that. It had to be pleasant, to just be able to switch off and go numb. She felt too much. Anxiety ruled her life; if she weren't reliving the Upside Down, she was turning her anxieties elsewhere, even if it meant trying to layer glitter on a poster to attempt to show off different types of rock. This damn assignment wasn't even worth that much of her grade, and the essay portion held a heavier weight.

'Dad?'

'Out. Bowling. Or... it might be darts tonight.'

Another worthwhile escape. Nancy really should have gone out for the softball team. It would have given her something to occupy her time with. Instead, she had ballet and geography homework. Turning back to the poster, she studied the layers she'd worked on. The glitter looked shit. She should have stuck with confetti. No, she should have stuck with civics. Something safe. Geography was bullshit, she was never going to have to tell the difference between types of sand. With a noise of disgust, she wiped her hand on the towel she'd brought to the garage with her and went about securing the cap back on the glue.

'Well?'

'Ugh. Fine. There's some leftover baked ziti in the freezer. Do we have any more green card?'

'Nancy, it looks fine. This is your sixth poster.'

'Third.'

'Today,' Mike interjected, picking up the poster before Nancy could tear it apart. 'Plus two yesterday, and one on Thursday. Mom's gonna be pissed.'

Nancy fixed her younger brother with a stare, her lips twisted into a frown. Her left leg had gone numb from how she'd been sitting on the ground, and she had a pounding headache at the back of her head. He was throwing her that look she hated. The one of mutual frustration, of understanding of what was being unsaid. Shoulders hunched up, she drew in a deep breath through her nose and pushed to her feet. At some point he'd begun to tower over her, a sign that so much in their life had begun to distort. It felt so unfair that he got their father's height and she was still shorter than their mom.

'Fine. Whatever. I'll put the oven on at five. But you're giving Holly her bath.'

'Nancy!' he cried as she stomped by him to wash her hands.

She ignored him. Really, she meant to ask was how long had El had a sister for? Where did she come from? Was she older or younger? It seemed unusual that Hopper would have adopted El and not her sister. The questions churned in her mind, but by the time she found her way to the bathroom to wash off her hands and try to pick the glue from her fingers, the questions had disappeared, like so much else down the drain.

Somehow, Nancy had been expecting someone about El and Mike's age to turn up. After preheating the oven and leaving the ziti out to defrost, she had retreated to her bedroom to tidy up. It was methodical, as she picked the remaining glitter out from under her fingernails and laid out a fresh set of clothes. It was always a guarantee to allow her a chance to catch her breath, to collect her thoughts. By the time the ziti was cooking and she had had a shower,

Nancy began to feel more like herself.

It was hard to say who she was now. There had always been a deep sense of comfort in finding herself in others. There was a security there. For one reason or another, she had always found it difficult to relate to other girls her age; her interest in boys had always come second to school, her interest in make up and fashion more invested in the way people could dress to put on a mask. She had found a deep connection with Barb, who would roll her eyes at the other girls in their year, yawn, and turn the topic of conversation to something else.

With Barb gone, Nancy had found herself swimming through her junior and senior years of school, trying to find herself again. Steve's girlfriend, Jonathan's girlfriend, Mike's sister, all titles that she held onto for a space of time, before finding herself empty once more. Instead, she told herself she only had to last out the rest of the school year, and then she could run off to college, find herself there. Surround herself in like-minded people. She had no idea what she wanted to study, although her mother offered her 'suggestions' that felt more like dictations, only that she wanted to get out of Hawkins.

By the time she came back downstairs, wet hair piled high on her head and drying into its characteristic curls, her low, simmering anxiety had been washed away. Other girls her age may have been going out that night to parties, on dates with their boyfriends, retreating to the backs of cars and under blankets to muffle noises, but Nancy was at home, with her younger siblings, reheating leftovers for her brother's girlfriend and her strange, new sister. That wasn't a bad place to be. Instead of being Nancy, high school darling, she was now Nancy, makeshift mom.

She could hear them downstairs, in the basement. Sticking her head around the corner to eyeball the staircase leading down, she heard the odd trill of laughter come up. Holly was following her, as she was wont do in lieu of their mother's absence, and Nancy led her to the kitchen. Scooping her up, she sat her on the island and went about slicing up the reheated, rebaked ziti. Shovelling some of it up with a spoon, she blew on it and offered it to Holly.

'Careful,' she said gently, 'it's hot.'

'Oh, that's sweet.'

With a start and a small curse, Nancy stepped back, spinning around to the source of the voice. Holly, unaccustomed to Nancy swearing in front of her, gave a laugh, even as the sauce landed on her lap. In a spin, she lurched towards a tea towel, dunked it in the glass of water she'd been sipping on, and began to hurriedly wipe up the mess that had covered Holly's lap. When it didn't appear to have actually soaked through to the leggings she wore underneath, she began to breathe again. Holly began to fuss; passing the spoon over to suck on, she dipped the cloth back into the water.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten- '

'Who are you?'

Somehow, that made the girl pause. It was rude to stare, and Nancy had always been one to nag Mike about it, but she found it impossible not to. It wasn't any singular thing. The clothes, the hair, the make up, the way she stood there, in the archway between the living room and kitchen as though she was entirely comfortable being in her home.

'Kali.'

The name meant nothing to Nancy. Continuing to eyeball her, Nancy caught herself, shook her head, and went back to swiping Holly's skirt. Taking the spoon from her younger sister, Nancy picked her up and set her back on the ground.

'Jane's sister?' the girl who called herself Kali clarified.

'Oh.'

It took a moment for the words to set in. Busy with neatening Holly up, it wasn't until Nancy straightened and grabbed two of the plates that she'd dished up that she suddenly put it together. Jane, who was El, had brought her sister along. A sister, who wasn't Mike or Holly's age, but older, perhaps even as old as Nancy or a couple of years older. Who dressed like the kids who lurked in the parking lot at school during lunch, smoking cigarettes and playing loud music, and

always intimidated and fascinated Nancy, just the tiniest bit.

'D'you want a hand?'

Balancing a plate in each hand, Nancy paused. Kali had taken a step towards her and Nancy had instinctively stepped back. There was no need to. The girl opposite her was, despite the high hair and tall boots, a good few inches shorter than her. Taking a deep breath, Nancy shook her head, attempting to play it off with a laugh.

'Oh- oh, no, I'm fine,' she said, quickly turning to place everything on the table.

'Can you tell me where the loo is, then?'

Holly had run ahead, carrying the napkins and a handful of forks, which had been her designated chore. Nancy, still carrying the plates, looked back at Kali.

'I'm sorry?' she asked, feeling as though she had missed something.

'Loo. Toilet,' Kali repeated, then, when Nancy still faltered, 'bathroom?'

'Oh,' Nancy said, which she felt was quick becoming her go-to phrase for El's strange, elder sister, who she wasn't sure was her biological sister, or just a turn of phrase, like girlfriend for a very close female friend. 'Through the living room behind you. Turn left, through the laundry.'

Kali nodded. She was eyeing Nancy in a way she couldn't quite read; warily, perhaps, or cautious. It made her feel hot under her blouse. Nancy waited until Kali had turned before she, too, spun back around and went to set the table. With a gentle push between Holly's shoulders to get her to call Mike and El up, Nancy went to finish setting the table. Knives, homemade lemonade, bread. By the time Mike, El and Kali were at the table, Nancy was sitting down next to Holly and helping her place her napkin on her lap in an effort to cover the stain.

As the first few clinks of cutlery hit the plates, Nancy found herself at a loss. Mike and El were continuing on the conversation they'd been

having when they sat down for dinner- something about a TV show, from what she could gather. Holly, nearly six and hitting an independent streak, kept pulling away from Nancy's attempts at helping her eat. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Kali eyeing her between careful bites of her own meal.

'This is good,' Kali finally said. 'Did you make it yourself?'

'Not unless you count taking it from the freezer and putting it in the oven,' Nancy replied drily.

It sounded needlessly rude, even to her ears. Skewering some of the pasta onto her fork, she waited a beat before glancing up at Kali. An impulsive apology sat on her lips, but it was left unsaid as she found the girl with a furrow on her brow and a smirk on her lips. Pursing her lips, Nancy met Kali's eye for half a breath, her fork halfway to her mouth. Unsure how to read her, Nancy stilled, barely daring to breathe before there was a clatter as Holly dropped her fork. Diving under the table to retrieve it, Nancy busied herself with cleaning it up and passing it back, glad for the diversion.

It was simply a yearning for something beyond Hawkins, Nancy decided as she cleaned up later, once Mike had headed back to the basement with El and Kali. She was sick of Hawkins and the small town rules and sensibilities. Kali had a way of carrying herself that spoke of a big city, a world beyond, and that was all Nancy was interested in. Besides, she didn't expect to see Kali again, anyway; she was probably like the punk and goth kids at school, and wouldn't want to speak two words to Nancy once she realised how much of a square she was.

After dinner, Nancy retreated back upstairs. Nobody asked, but she still provided an excuse of homework to do (yeah, just to prove what a square she was). Holly, by then far more intrigued by El and Kali, remained downstairs and asked Mike question after question.

By the time Nancy had finished her essay and had headed downstairs to tell Mike it was time to wrap it up, her father was home and the two girls were gone. Nancy stood in the kitchen, in the spot where she had first turned to find Kali, scratching her head. Good, she wanted to say. It wasn't her responsibility to make sure Mike got rid

of his guests at a reasonable hour.

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Unlike her relationship with Steve, which had dissolved into a series of awkward meetings and uncomfortable eye contact, Nancy had managed to maintain a close friendship with Jonathan after they'd broken up. The circumstances of it had been different, though. Nancy had been confused at first, hurt and a little angry, but even she had felt, deep in her bones, that it wouldn't last long. Two days before Valentine's Day, when they had planned a romantic date together, the relationship ground to a permanent halt. They kept their tickets to the ice skating rink, as it was non-refundable, and Nancy, somehow, found the strength to laugh and smile with the boy who had once been her boyfriend. A large line had been drawn between those two, very separate words. Boy and friend.

It hadn't been easy. Nancy's mother had questions, as she always did, and Nancy wasn't allowed to keep a secret for longer than a day. As a result, Nancy hadn't kept a diary since she was fourteen and the details of her first kiss had been repeated verbatim at the dinner table. After she and Jonathan fell back into being just friends, she had dodged and weaved her way out of every conversation her mother wanted to have. The details of their breakup were only important to her and Jonathan. She had promised to keep it a secret, and so far she had.

She met up with him during lunch; Jonathan still preferred to sit at his car, even as the cold of winter set in. The punks were a stone's throw away, and Nancy squinted at them as she pulled the crusts off her sandwich and tossed them to the hungry pigeons.

'I met El's sister yesterday.'

'Will mentioned she was coming down,' Jonathan said, with a curious lack of surprise. 'What's she like?'

Finally taking a small bite from her sandwich, Nancy let it sit in her mouth. Of course Will would have known. He and El had become close, and Will had always been Jonathan's little shadow. There was still the odd day here and there, when the two of them would have a

third, smaller companion now that will was in high school.

Nancy took her time answering the question. She wasn't even sure how to answer it. Kali had been *different*. If someone asked her to picture what El's sister looked like, she could have only come up with a version of Holly, with darker hair and wide eyes and psychic powers. Like the kid in that *Firestarter* movie.

'Not what I expected,' she finally settled on. Then, because she felt she should offer something else, continued on with, 'she had an accent.'

'Yeah, I think Will said she was from Chicago or somewhere.'

'No. No, it was more... I dunno, British.'

'Chicago by way of England, then.'

Pulling the plastic wrap back over her sandwich, Nancy dropped it into the front pocket of her satchel. Something had made the punk kids laugh, and her eyes slid over, watching as they collectively threw their heads back and cackled up at the sky. Grabbing a handful of her own hair, which had since grown down to her collar bones, she twisted a finger around a curl.

'Do you think it hurts?' she asked. 'When they pierce their face like that?'

Jonathan turned to look, causing Nancy to playfully smack his arm, lest he draw attention to them. The punk kids seemed to ignore Jonathan as a group, while Nancy's dressed-down preppy skirt and cable knit sweaters tended to draw their ire. Although none of them had ever directly approached her, she still felt as though they looked down their pierced noses at her, judging her soft pink blouses, her long, pleated skirts, and her preference for Madonna over the Sex Pistols (or whatever band it was that Jonathan liked).

'Only hurts their parents hopes and dreams,' Jonathan drawled sarcastically. 'Though I can't say it'd be very pleasant.'

Touching the tip of her nose, Nancy tried to imagine how it would feel to have a ring through a nostril. She had had her ears pierced

since she was a child and couldn't remember the pain. Scratching her nose, she went to pull out her water bottle when the bell rang, signalling the end of lunch. Beside her, Jonathan sighed heavily and eased off the hood of the car, causing it to shake. Bracing herself, Nancy followed suit.

'I'll see you in English?' Nancy asked, pulling the strap of her bag over her shoulder.

'Try not to sound too excited,' Jonathan teased in reply, rolling his eyes.

With a laugh, she knocked into him, their arms bumping, before she waved and hurried off to her math class. Maybe she didn't have an interesting hairstyle, wear crazy make up or have any unusual piercings beyond those in her earlobes, but she did have good grades and a friend who cared about her. That had to count for something.

*

The mystery of Kali continued to knock around Nancy's head for the rest of the week. A multitude of questions spun around her head about her, but Nancy didn't dare ask Mike any of them in case he accused her of being interested in his life. She most definitely wasn't. She was just curious about this girl who had blown in from Chicago, by way of England, and had supposedly taken up temporary residence in the Hopper household.

Nancy didn't want to ask Jonathan any direct questions, either. He seemed aloof and disinterested in Kali, seeming far more interested in finalising his backup applications for different colleges if he didn't get into New York. Nancy had managed to talk some sense into him, get him to start looking elsewhere; he couldn't just hedge his bets on one place. That particular talk had caused Jonathan to give her the silent treatment for a good few days (which was far longer than their post-breakup spell), before he bitterly admitted she was right, but goddammit, she couldn't tell his mother that or else she'd rub it in.

It wasn't abundantly clear why she wanted to avoid the topic of Kali, although she was bursting to learn more about her. It was perfectly natural for her to be curious. Although Nancy didn't play a huge role

in El's life, Mike did and Nancy, in theory, was interested in Mike's life. Well, as interested as a college-bound elder sister could be. She was allowed to want to know about the people he hung around with, as their mother would say. Even so, Nancy couldn't bring herself to utter the words.

The weekend dragged by, and come Saturday she found herself relegated to the carport again. She'd laid down a blanket to sit upon, a poster board in front of her. This time she was carefully drawing dots on the card in different markers, having carefully pencilled in a grid where she wanted each spot to be. She was a quarter of the way through the first layer of igneous, and her back was burning. At some point the temperature dropped and she could hear rain splattering on the roof and closed door of the garage.

'Can you drive me to Will's?'

Startling, Nancy yelped and lurched up. Mike was standing in the doorway, watching her.

'Jesus- shit, it's ruined!' Nancy cried, tossing the marker down. 'Can't you knock?'

Mike stepped forward and crossed to where she sat. Crouching down, he picked up the poster before she could tear it in two and looked it over. She moved onto her knees to grab it, but he held it up, using his ill-gotten height to prevent her from snatching it back.

'Ninny, it's fine,' he said, holding it out of her reach.

Nancy shuddered at the long-unused nickname, one he had created as a toddler and been unable to correctly pronounce her name. Twisting her lips into a frustrated moue, she turned her irritation to the marker in her hand instead and shoved the cap back on.

'Why don't you ride your bike to Will's?'

'It's raining. And, like, forty degrees.'

'Ask Dad to drive you.'

'He's watching the game.'

Neither sibling mentioned their mom. With a sigh, Nancy shoved the markers into the pencil case she'd retrieved them from and pushed up to her feet. Mike still held the poster, but he'd lowered it within reach; she didn't make an attempt to grab it.

'You know I don't drive in the rain.'

'You need to learn sometime. For when you go to Chicago.'

'Who said anything about Chicago?' Nancy asked warily, stepping around Mike to head inside. The rain had brought a terrible chill with it, and she could feel it settling into her bones.

'Or whatever big-name college you've applied to. Please, everyone's there. Lucas and Dustin and everyone. I bet Jonathan will be over.'

'Jonathan works Saturdays.'

'Well, you could ask Mrs Byers about your poster. I'm sure she'll have some suggestions. Kali will be there, too. You two can talk about... I dunno, make up or something. Whatever bullshit you girls talk about.'

That made Nancy pause. Not the part about Joyce assisting with her poster, but about Kali. It would be an non-surreptitious way of meeting her again. She was just being a helpful big sister, driving her younger brother around, nothing untoward about it at all. Pausing at the foot of the stairs, she looked back over at Mike, who was carefully holding the poster out straight between his fingers. Nancy hated it when the card was curled and she had to straighten it out again.

'Fine,' she said, tilting her chin up. 'But you're paying me back for the gas.'

Turning around before Mike could protest, she retreated upstairs to fix her hair and grab a warmer coat. She only wanted to look presentable to leave the house, she told herself. That was all.

They borrowed their father's car, who advised them to call if either of them would be home late. He didn't seem to comprehend they were going to the same location, and neither sibling were in the mood to

explain it to him. After giving Holly a kiss on top of the head, Nancy and Mike ran out to the car, the poster safely covered in a plastic bag to protect it. Nancy grit her teeth when she drove, her knuckles turning white. Mike was silent, as he tended to be when she was behind the wheel, silently watching the world go by. They kept the radio off; Nancy's preference.

There was a brief break in the rain by the time they arrived at the Byers. Pulling up on the gravel driveway, Nancy passed Mike the poster to wrangle and grabbed her bag from the backseat. The rain began to fall heavier as they reached the patio, Mike already swinging the front door open and letting himself in. Nancy was more polite, knocking on the door even when it was open.

There was no need. A group of young teenagers were crowding around the three-seater couch in the living room, passing around a few VHS cases. Nancy couldn't see what they were, but they had the look and design of the horror movies that the store in town rented out. Screwing up her nose, she shut the door behind her and wiped her shoes on the mat as she crouched to unlace her shoes. As the kids greeted her (they weren't kids, Nancy tried to rationalise- they were all beginning to sprout tell-tale marks of puberty), Nancy took a glance around.

'Where's your mom, Will?'

'She's at work,' he chirped, as Dustin announced they were going to watch the latest *Friday the 13th* film. 'She's bringing pizza after, if you and Mike wanna stay.'

Trying not to shoot a glare at Mike, Nancy settled for rolling her eyes. Fine, she'd been duped. The Byers had craft supplies, though. Looking about, she decided for the kitchen. It would be quieter in there, and she wouldn't need to listen to screams of the film. Pulling free the scarf from her neck, she took three steps to the kitchen and found herself facing El's sister again.

Kali. Her name was Kali. Of course her name was Kali. Nancy knew that. Kali, with half a shaved head, the rest of it a shocking mixture of plum and lavender. Kali, with an oversized leather jacket and fingerless gloves. Kali, who happened to be holding a bowl of

popcorn and wearing a muted, surprised look on her face.

There was a brief pause, before Nancy managed to pull an expression on her face that could almost be considered a smile.

'Hi. You're El's sister,' she said, somehow unable to bring herself to actually say her name.

'And you're Mike and Holly's sister. Popcorn?' she asked, offering the large bowl she was holding.

'Kali,' she blurted out. 'I mean. Your name's Kali. Which you obviously know. I'm just- I'm just saying I know your name. Excuse me.'

Pressing past her as best she could, Nancy quickly moved into the kitchen. She had no idea what had gotten into her. Nancy knew she could be shy, a little awkward, sometimes tongue-tied, but she didn't blather like that. Nor did she blush, and right then she could feel her cheeks growing red as she set the poster down on the kitchen table and pull off her jacket. She was tired, that was it. Tired and stressed and fed up with her damn poster.

As she sat down, she heard a light knocking on the wall behind her. Before she could turn, she heard Kali, her voice soft over the heavy thud of her boots on the linoleum.

'Your name is Nancy,' she said carefully. 'And you're Mike and Holly's sister. And you know how to reheat baked ziti. Can I sit?'

Breathing in sharply, Nancy looked up to where Kali had gestured to the seat opposite her. Although Nancy knew she needed to concentrate on her poster (it had to be perfect, she'd already used up most of the cardboard her mother had purchased her, Mike had already nearly ruined this one), she nodded all the same.

'What're you working on?'

'Poster,' Nancy said shortly. Then, because that sounded rude, 'it's an assignment. Homework. For a class at school.'

Craning her neck, Kali looked it over. 'What's it meant to be?'

'Stratum. Layers of rock.' Kali gave her a blank look. Scratching her ear, Nancy wondered how much detail she should go into. 'Well, uh. Over time, different layers of rock build up, right? And they can be made of different things. Like lava or sand or ash. Maybe. I think. It's for geography, I'm not very good at it.'

'It sounds like you know what you're talking about.'

Nancy rolled her eyes. 'Yeah. *Sounds* like. Anyway, I'm meant to be representing different layers on this poster, and I keep screwing it up and-'

Shaking her head, Nancy waved her hands and cut herself off. Pulling the markers from the pencil case, she gave a heavy sigh and began the process of carefully dotting each grid point once again. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kali watching her. Hunching her shoulders slightly, Nancy rested her head in her other hand and tried to focus on the poster. After several moments, she watched as Kali pushed herself up and away from the table.

A minute or two later she was back with a cookie tin Nancy recognised as some of Joyce's craft supplies. Lifting her pen off the card, she stopped to watch as Kali slid into the seat beside her and pulled the lid off and emptied the contents onto the table. There was a small hole punch and some left over paper from one of Joyce's scrapbooks. Kali grabbed a piece of paper and punched several holes in it. Picking up the small, confetti-shaped pieces, she drew them over to Nancy's poster with a fingertip and sat them down on the spots she'd been making. Nancy watched as pieces of confetti, yellow and orange and gold, began to cover the bottom third of the section she'd been working on.

'What about something like this? Lava, sand and ash all have different textures, right? You could try layering it.'

Nancy was quiet. She was curiously aware of how close Kali's knee was to her own leg. Her eyes fell to Kali's fingertips, her nails covered in chipped blue and black nail polish. Setting down the marker, she moved her own fingers, slight and carefully manicured, and pushed one of the pieces of confetti back into place from where it had moved as Kali arranged everything.

'That will take forever.'

'I can help.'

'It'll be boring.'

'I don't mind. I never went to school'

That caught Nancy's attention. Lifting her head, she turned to look at Kali.

'Well, I did for a couple of years, I think, in London. But the Lab only really taught us stuff that we needed to know. Reading, writing. A little bit of math. The names of the presidents, though I wouldn't have been able to tell you who they were.'

'You were in the Lab?' Nancy asked, although it suddenly made a lot of sense. It was strikingly obvious now, and she felt like an idiot for not having picked up on it sooner.

Kali, though, only squinted at her, in that funny way she had back in her kitchen. She smiled, nodded, and picked up the hole punch again. Taking the rest of the wrapping paper she'd been destroying, she began to litter her corner of the poster with small, perfectly-cut holes.

'Class of '82, homeslice.'

If a blush had been threatening to cascade over Nancy's cheeks before, then that was nothing compared to what hit her then. Her face turned crimson as she stared at the side of Kali's face, her hair trailing down over the shaved side and across her shoulder. Of course it made sense now, Kali and El calling each other sisters. Nancy had also guessed that there would have been more than one girl. Mike had probably mentioned it at some point, too, over the year, and Nancy just hadn't paid attention.

'I'm sorry.'

'Why? You weren't the one to lock me and El up.'

'I mean- I'm just sorry. For...' Nancy shrugged. Everything. Nothing. She didn't know. But it felt like the right thing to say all the same.

Kali's hand finally stilled. For a brief second, nothing more than a moment of madness, Nancy felt as though she should take hold of it. Instead, she dug the side of her thumb into the marker she was still holding, her other hand pushing into the side of the table. In the next room, the boys had begun to laugh and Max was loudly proclaiming that the special effects were 'so fake'. Someone, no doubt, had just been sliced in two. Nancy's stomach churned at the thought as she carefully capped the marker.

'Have you ever tried to find your family?' she finally asked. It didn't feel safe, but she didn't want to ask about the Lab.

That made Kali turn her head, her lower lip get pulled by her teeth. Her fingers twitched, stopping just short of each piece of confetti. None had been stuck down yet, and the slightest brush of wind caused by her fingers caught the pieces of paper and sent them dancing over the card. Once more, she had the urge to take Kali's hand, clasp it between her own. Nancy's hands were always cold. Kali looked like she ran hot.

'Family is what you make it,' Kali said as she ran her hand over the card and collected the confetti into a pile. 'I made my own.'

Nancy's curiosity spiked, but she wasn't too sure how far to pry. More questions had been raised, and they all threatened to come spilling out. She could feel them, pressing against her lips, her tongue and teeth already forming the vowels and consonants that would spell out the words. Swallowing them down, she grit her teeth and looked back at her poster.

From the living room, someone yelled at in shock. It sounded like Mike. The jeering confirmed it, and Nancy affectionately rolled her eyes and gave a crooked smile at Kali. The other girl was already grinning, but she lowered her eyes when she saw Nancy looking at her.

'I like the confetti idea,' she admitted, instead of asking one of her dozens of questions. 'Thank you.'

'Did you want some help gluing them?'

Nancy paused. 'I can be... picky. But you can use the hole puncher, if you don't mind.'

Kali gave her that look again, the one Nancy couldn't quite name. It was the same look that made a blush spread across her cheeks, not quite as hot or as vibrant as the one from before, but a blush all the same. It was probably because Kali seemed so sophisticated. So worldly. She had said she was from the class of '82, but that seemed to be more a glib remark than anything. Probably the year she had escaped from the Lab. She couldn't be that much older than Nancy, though she felt too shy to ask and confirm it.

The silence that descended over the table wasn't uncomfortable. Nancy liked the quiet. Both Steve and Jonathan had a penchant for filling silence with noise. Steve liked to talk, as though he were afraid that if he let anyone get a word in edgewise, they might ask an unsettling question. Jonathan, on the other hand, filled the gaps with music. Loud, thrashing, British punk noise, the kind that rattled Nancy and made it impossible to think. And then there was Kali, who had started on a sheet of dark purple wrapping paper, so deep that it almost seemed black. It looked like her hair.

'Jonathan mentioned you're from Chicago.'

'That's where I've found myself,' Kali replied, dropping a handful of confetti into the corner of the page. 'I spent my childhood in London. Before the Lab. From what I've read, my parents were from India, though I don't remember anything that early.'

'I didn't- I wasn't trying to pry,' Nancy hurriedly said.

'But you were wondering,' Kali replied, not unkindly.

It took Nancy a beat to realise she was holding her breath. She didn't let go of it, though, until Kali stopped what she was doing and turned to look at her. It was a slow movement. It was like watching her through a pool of water, every movement delayed by a second. She lifted her head, slid her eyes in Nancy's direction, before turning her head. Yes, Nancy had wondered. She was wondering a lot of things. About why Kali was in the Lab. How she'd wound up in Chicago, how she'd actually managed to escape. Who were family was, both born

and made, and where they were now. How long she'd be in Hawkins for, how long she'd be staying around.

A sudden shriek from the living room caused those thoughts to scatter, like dust in the wind. Jolting, Nancy dropped the marker onto the table. With a hand over her chest, she let out a breath, then laughed as she realised as it was only from the film. Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, she lowered her face, her bashfulness returning.

'I don't know how they can stand those films. After... everything,' she said, waving her hand in a way that suggested what the everything was.

The corner of Kali's mouth tugged upwards. 'It's easier if someone's there to hold your hand,' she whispered, as though conspiratorially.

Nancy squinted at her. She was probably right. Steve hadn't been a fan of horror movies, and her relationship with Jonathan had never involved going to the cinema, at least not in that capacity. But she smiled, nodded all the same, and went back to the poster. She much preferred sitting here, working on this with her, than watching a bunch of teenagers get sliced and diced by a boogeyman, anyway.

*

Even before Jonathan uttered the words to her, Nancy had known. It was hard to say how. There was no singular waking moment, nothing that had rushed up to her and shaken her in the middle of the night. It had been slow. Careful. She had had time to consider it and mull it over, and so by the time Jonathan had finally said those two, quiet words to her, proceeded by an unsure, 'I think I'm', Nancy had been given adequate time to prepare for it.

That wasn't to say it had been easy. It hadn't. She had cried. Jonathan had cried. She asked if it was her, if it was something she had done, and Jonathan had shrugged and said 'not really', because it wasn't anything about her except for the one undeniable thing she couldn't change. So she'd asked if there was someone else, and Jonathan shook his head, because in all of Hawkins, it was just him. At least it felt that way. So Nancy had gone home and cried some more, wanting to be angry at him, but mostly angry with herself, because

she had known, deep down. She wanted to hate him but she couldn't.

Going ice skating had helped. The first fifteen minutes had been awkward. Neither of them wanted to look at each other. The first few laps were skated in an uncomfortable silence, until some speed freak pushed past Nancy. She'd grabbed onto Jonathan's arm and sent him careening down, pulling her with him. They had laughed, groaned as they rubbed their tailbones and shins, and Jonathan made a jab that Nancy was meant to be good at this. That small moment told her that they would be okay.

They rarely spoke about it. Nancy wasn't sure if she wanted to. It wasn't ignored, either. Jonathan told her when he came out to his mom and then to Will a few weeks later. And although they never went so far as to check out guys together, she'd sometimes catch Jonathan eyeing a classmate at lunch, the occasional turn of his head that would have Nancy subtly elbowing him in the ribs. It was cute. Sort of. She didn't know what to make of it.

It was the Monday after she'd been at the Byers and sat with Kali. Joyce had come home from work, but Jonathan had never turned up. Joyce had suggested he was working late, but she'd said it in a funny way, like she'd been put on the spot and had to come up with something. That was very likely it, but Nancy hadn't questioned her right then. As she watched Jonathan in front of her in class, tapping his foot on the ground, the way he did when he had news, she had that same sudden dawning that had haunted her in the weeks leading up to their breakup.

Somehow they waited until lunch. Nancy found him by his car, crushing a can of Coke in his hand, a sandwiched untouched by his side. Hugging herself to stop the cold from getting into her coat, she jerked her chin at him.

'Okay, spill.'

Jonathan lifted his eyes to her. He took a breath, held it, no doubt considering the implications of telling her. His inability to withhold the information had him divulging almost immediately, though.

'I went on a date. Sort of.'

'No shit.' Nancy gave him a playful shove, causing him to scoot over so she could join him on the hood of his car. She said it loud enough for the local punks to look over and eyeball them, before returning to whatever anarchist conversation they were having. 'You've been squirming like you've got gas. Who with?'

With a soft laugh, Jonathan ducked his head. 'I can't tell you that.'

'Then how do I know you actually went on a date?'

Jonathan levelled his eyes with hers. 'He's... like me.'

In the closet.

Pursing her lips, Nancy considered forcing the issue at any rate. 'Does he go to school here?'

'Nancy.'

'Do I know him?'

'Nancy.'

Jonathan was grinning, and there was a laugh in his voice. She couldn't tell if that was a yes or no, but she gave him a playful punch in the arm all the same.

'I just want to know!'

'Ugh. He's a guy, he lives in Hawkins, he doesn't want anyone knowing he's... that way, so we're just keeping it low. God, I don't know even know if it's going to go anywhere. It wasn't even really a date. More... we just went out for a coffee after work- and no, that doesn't mean we work together. I mean after I finished work.'

Beaming, Nancy turned to face him. Jonathan had ripped the crust off his sandwich and was chewing it carefully, keeping his face down. His hair, long and shaggy, covered half of one cheek, and a soft flush had grown over his pale features. A smile was tugging on his lips, and occasionally he'd suck on his lower lip, just for a second, before he looked back at his sandwich and took a small nibble.

'And then what?'

'What d'you mean, "and then what"?'

'After coffee.'

Jonathan looked up at her. His lips were pinched together, his face carefully still. She watched as he turned the question over in his mind. Jonathan had always worn his emotions visibly, and this was no different. He considered it from each angle, before he smiled and shrugged, looking away again.

'We... you know. Made out a little.'

He grinned as he said it, his voice soft. With an elated cry of delight, Nancy swayed on the hood of the car, nearly losing her footing. Jonathan grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back in place. Somewhere to the left, the punks were scoffing, and she couldn't tell if it was at them or at something else. She didn't mind.

'It was nice,' he continued quietly, unable to hide his smile. 'He was a good kisser. It was... we might be meeting up again this weekend.'

Watching him quietly, Nancy grabbed a handful of her hair. Twisting it around a finger, she let her eyes dance over his features. He looked softer. It was the only way to describe it. Jonathan had always seemed so nervous when they were together, as though he were afraid of putting a foot wrong. Now that she knew the insecurity he was going through, the doubts that had plagued his mind, she knew why. He'd never had that bashful smile for her that he held now. Hunching over, he bit the tip of his thumb, holding his half-eaten sandwich in his other hand.

A few months ago it would have made her upset, to see him this happy. Now it only made her wistful. Curiosity had sprung up inside of her as she finally took a bite of her own sandwich. Her mind suddenly turned to Kali, with her half-shaved head and bold, striking make-up. Twirling her hair around her finger, the same dirty brown it had always been, she wondered what it would look like in the same dramatic style Kali had.

'How did you know?' she asked suddenly, tugging on a split end.

'Know what?'

'That you were...' She paused, and then said so quietly that she barely uttered the word, 'gay?'

That made Jonathan stop. The smile disappeared slightly as he pulled off another piece of crust. Chewing on the end of it, he lifted his head and glanced over at the punks. They were a dozen or so feet away, not nearly close enough to hear. It was a cold day, and most of their peers were inside, where it was no doubt warm.

'I think I always knew,' he finally said, thinking aloud as he went. He took a sip from the can of soda and set it back down. 'Before us. It was always there, but... I thought that maybe I just needed to actually go and *do* it, y'know? And you- I'd always liked you. I look at you and I know that you're attractive. You're pretty and smart and a lot funnier than people think.'

'Geez, thanks,' Nancy drawled, rolling her eyes.

Jonathan laughed.

'I'm just- I'm just saying, I'd look at you, and mentally, intellectually, I can go yeah. Yeah, here she is, an attractive girl, I'm an idiot if I screw this up. And I didn't want to. I figured... well, Will's a late bloomer, maybe I was, too. Because I know you're attractive, and guys would have killed to be in the same position as me. But then... it's like it wouldn't connect. I couldn't make the pieces go together.'

Nancy rested her feet on the bumper of the car, nodding as she listened. Somehow she could understand what he was saying. There was always something off. It hadn't just been Jonathan. It had happened with Steve, too. There'd always been something not quite right. Sometimes Nancy wondered if she was defective. She had cared for both Steve and Jonathan deeply, in different ways, but she'd always felt like she'd had one foot out the door. It had almost been a relief when Jonathan had told her about that. It hadn't just been her.

Sometimes she still felt like she was a little broken. She didn't fit in

with the other girls at school, either. There was a puzzle piece that had been carved for someone like her, someone female-shaped and neurotic and polite, and Nancy tried to shove herself in to fit, but she couldn't quite squeeze in.

'But then when- on Saturday,' Jonathan continued after a pause, a slight catch in his voice making him cough. 'It suddenly... it made sense. It felt *right*. Like- maybe whatever is happening with- with *him* is a one-time deal. Maybe nothing will happen between us. But it suddenly felt *right*. Like yeah, this is where I'm meant to be. This is what I'm meant to be doing.'

That made Nancy lower her sandwich. What he was meant to be. It was a wonderful concept. Nancy had no idea what she wanted out of life, only that it didn't involve Hawkins. Tightening her coat around her, she laid her barely eaten sandwich beside her, back in the cling wrap.

'I read this book in the library over the summer, and this psychologist, scientist-type guy, he'd come up with this scale from one to six or zero to six or something. And on one end, you've got your super straight types, and on the other end is pure gay. And this guy, he said just about everyone sort of floats in the middle. Two through five.'

'So where are you?'

Jonathan hummed as he thought, though Nancy suspected he'd already decided.

'I'd say I'm a level five gay.'

'A level five gay?'

Nancy began to laugh as she repeated it, tossing her head back. After a breath, Jonathan joined her, their shoulders bumping as the can of Coke rolled off the car and spilled over the sodden ground. Tears sprung into her eyes as she smacked him playfully, even as she felt the punks staring at them. The bell rang for their next class, and Nancy was still snickering as she shoved the remains of her lunch in her bag. She told herself that she was just naturally curious about this

supposed scale because she found psychology as a whole interesting-not because she wanted to read what level she'd be.

*

Kali had stuck in Nancy's mind. She felt like a song that Nancy couldn't quite shake. As she had left the Byers that afternoon, the confetti safely secured into a series of small Tupperware containers that she promised Joyce she would return shortly, she found herself humming Kali's name on her lips. She had explained that several members of her found family had decided to go their separate ways for Thanksgiving, and Kali, in a moment of mad inspiration, had decided to do the same thing. Their names had been uttered, unusual ones like *Funshine* and *Axel* and *Dottie*, and Nancy smiled and tried to remember them. Kali missed them, that much was clear.

The following day, Nancy lay down a towel in her bedroom and spread the cardboard out. Before she got to work, she found one of Jonathan's mixtapes, filled with music by bands that only he seemed to know about. As loud, 1970s punk came over the speakers, Nancy sat down, her skirt spread around her like a puddle of pale blue linen. Scattering the confetti in the corner of the page, she began the careful process of dabbing a spot of glue on the back of each piece of paper and placing it squarely in the middle of each dot she'd made on the page. It was slow and painful, her back aching in the same spot it always did before she'd finished the first layer of rock.

Her poster wasn't finished that day. Holly wanted her attention; she was obsessed with some weird show called *Gummi Bears*, or something to that effect, and wanted Nancy to play with toys from the show. Mike wanted help with his math homework, and after preparing lunch of Holly, she found all inspiration to work on her poster was gone. Instead, she found herself laid out on her bed, toes at each corner, hands above her head, and mind on the strange girl who called herself El's sister.

She was just... curious. That was it. Fascinated by the strange quasi-English girl, whose parents were from India. Intrigued by the girl who had spent her formative years in a government experimental lab just down the road from her, and now called Chicago home. With all the trauma that had happened the past few years, Nancy was allowed

to want to find something else to cling onto. And if that something happened to a girl closer to her own age than El, with half a shaved head and a preference for billowing black clothes and unlaced boots, then so be it. Besides, Mike already had dibs on the only other psychic in town- or whatever it was that El and Kali happened to be.

It was on Wednesday afternoon when Nancy saw Kali again. She had started to think that perhaps Kali had left town. Thanksgiving was the following day, but she hadn't seemed all that attached to a holiday that was all about family and togetherness, when her own family was scattered predominately along the northern border.

Nancy didn't always walk home from school. Sometimes Jonathan would offer her a ride, which she'd gladly accept. If it was raining, she would quite reluctantly take the bus. Stubbornly refusing to drive (and it definitely wasn't because she was afraid of sitting behind the wheel, definitely not, there was just very few reasons for her to drive, as she insisted to most people who asked), she typically found herself meandering her way home. She didn't live so far away that it took long. Twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes at the most.

That Wednesday was a walking-home day. She waved Jonathan off as he drove Will to his dentist appointment, checked the clear, cold sky and started her way home. Mike had already pedalled off far ahead, off to play some video game with Lucas. She might even have the house to herself when she got home; she was sure her mother had some hairdressing appointment, or a date with a friend to get her nails done.

There was a tremendous roar behind her as she turned the corner, and she took several stumbling steps towards the wooden fence she was near. For a terrifying moment, she half-expected to be run down, only to find herself locking eyes with Kali, who was pulling an oversized helmet off her head. She was sitting on a motorbike, a beast of a machine. Nancy had no concept of brands, but it was shiny chrome and black, seeming to be comprised entirely of an engine. And there was Kali, short in height with long hair tossed over one shoulder, throwing Nancy one hell of a smile.

'You know how to ride one of those things?' Nancy gawked as a way of a hello.

'Nah, I'm just sitting on this for shits,' Kali replied with a cheeky smirk. Then, with a nod, 'want a lift?'

'I'm almost home,' Nancy replied, jabbing her thumb down the road.

'I know. I was waiting for you and I got bored, so I thought I'd come and look.'

That made Nancy blush, an act that was fast becoming a habit. It hit her cheeks with such an intensity that she felt compelled to duck her head, her hair falling over her face. Grabbing a lock of it, she replayed the words in her head, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. She had no idea how to respond to that. She supposed she was the only person around Kali's age that she knew in Hawkins, possibly aside from Jonathan. Nancy wasn't entirely sure what Kali was doing with herself when El was in school, though, so she had to be getting bored.

'Shouldn't you be waiting for El?' she asked when she finally dared to look up.

Kali looked over her shoulder. She made a show of glancing about, before she leant over, one hand resting atop the helmet, and gestured for Nancy to come over. Taking a few short steps, Nancy bowed her head towards her, clutching the strap of her bag to her chest.

'Just between you and me, if I have to listen to one more explanation about the latest episode of *Days of Our Lives* from Jane, I'm going to kill myself,' she whispered, mock-conspiratorially. Then, brighter and louder. 'She can handle one afternoon away from me. Besides, Jim was telling me about the abandoned quarry. I want to have a poke around.'

It was an invitation. It had been a long time since anyone had invited Nancy anywhere that would be just the two of them. She was always being extended invitations to parties, to group events, but she couldn't recall the last time specifically asked out with an individual since Barb died. Sure, Jonathan invited her to go out every now and then, but even then, Nancy always expected Will to be tagging along.

'I- I've got homework to do,' she found herself saying, suddenly

unsure what to do.

'Oh, come on,' Kali drawled, rolling her eyes.

Before Nancy could step back, Kali had her hand around her slim wrist. She gave a pull and Nancy rolled her eyes, allowing herself to get tugged in. The helmet was passed to her, and she took it, surprised with the weight. It was thicker and heavier than she expected.

'You can do your homework later. Isn't it Thanksgiving tomorrow?' Kali asked.

When Nancy didn't reply, Kali let go and took the helmet from her. She spun it around in her hands, and it was soon being forced onto Nancy's head. She let out a soft noise as her head became trapped in foam. Mostly, however, her eyes were locked on Kali. Her hands, soft and covered in rings that glinted in the sunlight, were fussing with the strap that locked the helmet under her chin. She had done her hair in a loose braid, and it swayed over her shoulder as she moved. She recognised her make up in the way El styled her own, thick powder surrounding her eyes.

Kali's eyes flicked up to meet Nancy's. For a moment, she felt her air get stuck in her chest. Her hands were shaking. Tightening her grip on her bag, she waited for something she couldn't name. She could smell Kali's hairspray in the helmet, as well as something spicy and floral; a body spray she had once picked up in the supermarket and smelt.

'C'mon. Hop on.'

'I've never ridden on one of these before.'

Kali was pulling her over again. Uncertainly, Nancy swung her bag to her front and cautiously tossed a leg over. The bike felt massive, and she cautiously tucked her skirt underneath her as she sat down. Fingers twitching, she scooted down, unsure just how close she was meant to sit, or where she was meant to even put her hands. The answer was made for her when Kali reached behind, took both her hands, and brought her arms around so her hands were flat on her

stomach. The position meant Nancy was pulled in close, her bag trapped between the two of them.

'Just hold on tight, yeah? You're not going to fall.'

Kali's voice was mostly muffled by the helmet. Leaning in, Nancy caught the gist of what was being said and nodded. Hold on. She could do that.

It was easier said than done. As Kali pulled away from the curb, Nancy gave out a cry. Her arms snaked tighter around Kali as the bike sped down the street, the hem of her skirt flapping in the breeze. The cold air cut through her thick, woollen tights, her sweater suddenly seeming far too light for what they were doing. And yet, as the bike dipped low around a corner and Nancy squeezed tighter, she found herself laughing. It was terrifying and it was exhilarating. Squealing in fear and delight, she pressed closer into Kali, the soft, pale blue of her sweater contrasting to the thick, black leather of Kali's jacket.

Kali already knew the way to the quarry. For a second, Nancy wondered if perhaps she'd already gone there once before, already had a 'poke around' as she'd said. The thought was flung from her mind, though, as they picked up speed and climbed up the hill, towards the quarry. The helmet didn't provide much in the way of peripheral vision, but she caught glimpses of Kali all the same. The careful concentration, the way she'd sometimes tilt her head, as though she, too, were trying to sneak a glance back at her before turning back to the road.

As they hit the path down to the quarry, the dirt road beneath them caused the bike to shake. Nancy's fingers tightened to the jacket Kali wore as a result, even as Kali whooped with delight. The bike jostled and her knees instinctively pressed into either side of it. The muscles in her legs burned as she held on as a wave of heat rolled over her, starting low in belly and climbing higher. The bike was vibrating against her, and Nancy was all too aware of it. Gripping as tightly as she dared onto Kali, she pursed her lips tight, breathing in sharply as she shut her eyes. Everything felt too close, far too close, and she could smell Kali, could feel her back that was pressed up against her breasts, and everything was hot. Her skin was clammy, her face was

flushing, her head was spinning, and she suddenly felt strangely, peculiarly queasy. Off. She had to get off.

The bike suddenly halted. Dirt kicked up around Nancy's feet, the kickstand was lowered, and Kali was slipping from Nancy's vice-like grip. Watching as she hopped from bike, Nancy blinked owlishly as Kali chirped they had arrived. She was sweating profusely, the heat still burning deep within her. The helmet was yanked unceremoniously off her head, and she shook at her hair, feeling it fall down her back. Kali set it down between the handlebars and jerked her thumb behind her.

'You coming?' Kali asked as she pulled off her gloves and shoved them in her back pocket.

Nancy stared at her, silent. She was still dizzy. Kali was waiting for an answer, and she coughed, clearing her throat.

'Just... was just a little intense,' she finally said, taking the hand that was offered.

Her legs felt like jelly. Somehow managing to stand, she pulled her bag off and set it down by the bike. Smoothing out her skirt, her hair, her sweater, she gave Kali a careful smile, trying to indicate she was fine, just peachy. She didn't dare name what was going on. If Kali suspected anything, too, she didn't let on. She was already looking around, crossing to where the water lapped at the sediment.

'I passed the quarry. When I escaped,' she said over her shoulder.

The temperature was cooler down here. As the sweat dried under her clothes, Nancy followed Kali from behind.

'How'd you do it?' Nancy asked.

'I was on a bus. Up there, on the main road. I looked down, and I could see all this water. It was the most I'd ever seen in one place.'

'No, I mean... how'd you escape?'

Kali paused. She turned on the ball of her foot to face Nancy. She was quiet for a breath, as she scooped to pick up a rock. With a flick of

her wrist, she had flung it across the water. It skipped once, twice, three times until it sunk into the frigid depths.

'I can create illusions. Make people believe things that aren't there.'

'Oh.' Nancy tilted her head, considering that. 'I do ballet. It doesn't seem as interesting.'

That caught Kali's attention. She had bent to pick up another stone, but she stood. That funny expression that she threw Nancy occasionally had returned. It was the same one from the first time they met, and then again when she offered to help with her poster. It made Nancy pull her sleeves down over her heads, her pale eyes dart over Kali as she took in her chunky boots, her jeans with rips at the knees.

'You should dance for me sometime.'

'Oh, no, I'm terrible. Can you show me?'

Sucking on her teeth, Kali looked about. Reaching out, she took Nancy's hand and placed her own over it. Her hand was lightly cupped, just her fingertips touching the soft underside of her wrist. When she lifted her hand off, a violet the size of her palm lay there. She swore she could almost feel it, as though static electricity clung to her palm. When she tried to curl her fingers around it, though, they went straight through. The deep purple of the petals vibrated, distorting around her digits until she released them.

Letting out a noise of admiration, the flower suddenly exploded into a sea of colour. The petals multiplied and joined until they were butterflies, purple and silver, shimmering like the water they stood by. Nancy stood there, astounded and wide-eyed. There was a brush of electricity against her cheeks, a suggestion of wind against her eyelashes and lips as the violet butterflies flew up. Reaching up, she watched as her fingers ran through them, the wings distorting until they all disappeared from view, one by one.

'That's amazing,' she murmured, wide-eyed. Still reaching up, she tried to catch the last of the butterflies.

Kali shrugged, despite the smile on her face, and gave a soft, self-deprecating laugh. She waved her hand, and for a moment Nancy swore she could see tendrils of colour coming from her fingertips. Pinks and purples, trailing into a silvery white. But she blinked, rubbed her eyes, and they were gone.

'You're not like El.'

'No, no. We were all different. We all had our own gifts.'

Nancy had tried to reach out and grab the ribbons that extended from Kali's hand. She could see a flash of a small tattoo, a slightly faded 008 etched into her skin. Dropping her hand, she clasped her fingers together. The rolling heat within her had mostly subsided, but she could still feel remnants of it.

'It's all perception. Make you believe what I want you to believe. If something's there, if something's not there.'

'It's amazing. You're amazing.' Nancy clutched at a lock of hair, still looking up at the afternoon sky as though she expected to see the butterflies again. 'Can you do anything else?'

'Anything else?' Kali repeated.

Nancy nodded. Kali took a moment to look at her, and then cast her eyes upwards. She seemed to be thinking about it, as she stepped slowly, kicking the dirt beneath her feet. She took a few steps towards the water, grabbing another stone as she did, and tossed it back out. This one only skipped twice before it sunk. From where she stood, it was difficult to read Kali's face. Tilting her head, Nancy wondered if perhaps she'd asked something inappropriate; maybe it was rude to ask a person with superpowers just what they could do.

'I can teleport,' Kali finally said, turning back around.

'Can I see?'

At that, Kali's pursed her lips. The edges were twitching, as though she wanted to smile and was forcing it down. She hummed while she considered it, and finally shrugged.

'You'll need to close your eyes.'

'Why?'

'It can be very disorientating to see,' Kali replied smoothly. 'Seeing someone pop up in a completely different location in an instant. So you'll need to shut your eyes. It's for your own safety.'

Squinting at her sceptically, Nancy stuck her lower lip out. She could tell Kali was pulling her leg, but she couldn't say how. Arching a brow, she measured the distance between them- seven, maybe eight feet at the most.

'Go on. Shut your eyes.'

With a groan, Nancy rolled them skywards and placed her hands over her face.

'No. Close them,' she heard Kali laugh. 'Hands down. No cheating.'

'If this is some joke, I *swear*- if you run off- '

'I'm not. I promise.'

With a heavy sigh, Nancy dropped her hands. Keeping her eyes shut tight, she threw Kali a smile, still wary. She could hear the crunch of sediment beneath their feet, the water lapping at the shore. Somewhere, far off, a bird was chirping. Her father would likely know what kind. Maybe a cardinal. The wind, racing down the cold walls of the quarry, where it sent a chill down her spine. The vast, empty space was so quiet and so noisy, all at once.

She heard Kali announce 'on three' and begin to count back, but Nancy found herself preoccupied by the way she was standing, what her hands were doing. The wind had kicked up a tendril of hair, and it tickled under her jaw. Her tights had twisted on the motorbike and one shoe was tied tighter than the other. She felt so dowdy, in her pleated skirt and neat sweater, her hair a mess from the helmet.

She didn't hear Kali get to one. She didn't hear her step. But she did feel the lips on her own, of another person's breath on her cheek. She knew a kiss when she was experiencing one, eyes shut or not. It was

warm and soft- Kali was warm and soft. Kissing in general was familiar to Nancy, but the gentleness of Kali's lips were different. There was no firm jaw, no burn of stubble that seemed to exist, even after a boy had just shaved. Nancy had to turn her chin down to accommodate Kali's height. There was a swell of breasts she'd never experienced, a braid that brushed the side of her face as she turned her head to respond before she acknowledged what she was doing. It was only when she felt a swipe of tongue against her lower lip that Nancy lurched away, sucking in a lungful of air as she did so.

They were both frozen. Nancy's hand shot up to her mouth. Her lips were buzzing, just like the floral butterflies from before. The heat in her belly had surged back into life, a monstrous roar that extended down her legs and to her toes.

Kali was waiting for her. She knew that look: expectant and concerned about crossing a line and needing permission to act.

'You cheated.' Nancy's voice was a whisper, a crack slicing through it.

'What?'

'You walked. You cheated.'

Kali took a moment to let it sink in. 'You're right. I can't teleport.'

Nancy's fingers had found their way to her mouth. Everything seemed to be vibrating, a tremor rushing through her body like she was back on the bike. Like she was still touching the petals of the flower before it burst into magnificent butterflies. And there was Kali in front of her, doubt marring her features as Nancy still reeled, unable to breathe. Her heart was racking in her chest, and she could feel it all the way in her throat.

'Nan, I'm sorry, I shouldn't- '

'No- '

Shooting her hands out before she could think twice, Nancy grabbed the lapels of Kali's coat. Pulling her in, she pressed their mouths together, her mind reeling with what she was doing. She was Nancy Wheeler. She didn't kiss girls. She didn't ride motorbikes or follow

strange girls down to the quarry. She studied and she did ballet and she babysat her little sister. But she also did fight interdimensional beasts and shoot guns and try to expose government secrets. So maybe there was room in her life for both, somehow. But there was a singular, shivering thought as she drew her hands to cup Kali's cheeks and felt the girl's warm hand rest on the back of her neck: Jonathan had been right. He'd been so right.

Kali was pressed right up against her. Nancy was half-aware of the step she took herself, just enough to fold herself around Kali. Everything felt different, compared to a boy. Nancy was the taller person for a change. There was a dip in Kali's middle, between her rib and her hip, where Nancy's hand naturally went. Her other hand went up to grip at the loose fishtail braid that hung down behind Kali's ear and over her shoulder. It was all so... so female. So feminine. Kali didn't have the breadth of Jonathan or Steve, or any of the other boys Nancy had made out with.

All the while, Kali seemed far more cautious to touch Nancy. One hand was folded around the back of Nancy's neck, the other resting on her shoulder. Her fingers would curl, and Nancy could feel her nails biting, bringing to mind her chipped polish. It was only when Nancy splayed her hand wider over Kali's waist, unintentionally pushing her jacket up and finding herself with a fistful of cotton blouse that Kali's hands finally moved. Down, along her back, following her spine, to the hem of her sweater. It slipped up and under, rucking up the back of her shirt so her palm, soft and warm (and yes, Kali did run hot, a fact Nancy was glad to find), rested at the small of her back.

She was hot again. Too hot. Despite the cold air blowing in across the water, despite the freezing stone walls of the quarry. She was sweltering under her sweater, through her tights, and she gripped at Kali, pressing into her, and *oh*, Kali made the sweetest noise as she did. Half a moan, half a whispered cry, so soft and delicate, and Nancy had never heard a boy make that noise before. Maybe something similar, but nothing so careful, like an unintended gasp.

It was Kali who broke away first. Nancy was shivering, lips parted as she tried to follow the smaller girl, until their brows were pressed together, both panting. Kali was cupping her face with one hand,

Nancy still gripping at her braid with the other. She kept her eyes shut, lids squeezed tight until spots of yellow and lavender lit up underneath them. She could feel Kali shaking, her breath coming out in ragged bursts.

'I've never kissed a girl before,' she admitted when she dared to open her eyes.

'I didn't think so. Thought I'd take the risk anyway.'

Nancy laughed. It was breathless, more a shaking of her shoulders as a smile lit up her face. Even with her eyes shut again, she could feel Kali sharing her smile. Before she could move away, Kali was kissing her again, chasing the smile on Nancy's lips until she was laughing again, louder, as she shook her head and squealed. Kali had her wrapped in her arms, holding her tight, and Nancy was pressed in against her. She could feel every breath, the swell of Kali's breasts against her own, her warm skin against Nancy's cool body.

The temperature had dropped. Lifting her head, Nancy squinted at the sky; in the distance, clouds were rolling in, dark and heavy. Kali followed her eyes, then turned back to her, the corner of her mouth twisted into a reluctant smile.

'I should get you home, huh?'

Rolling her eyes, Nancy shrugged and nodded, not wanting to agree but knowing it would be for the best. She let Kali take her hand, the one that had been clutching at her braid only minutes earlier, and lead her back to the bike. Throwing her bag back on, she adjusted the strap so it was snug against her back. Kali popped the helmet back over her head; she could see the way Kali's eyes lingered on her lips, her teeth brushing over her own as she fussed with the strap a little longer than strictly necessary. She waited for Kali to get on the bike first before she hopped on behind her. This time, without the bag between them, she was pulled in snug, her skirt bunched up in her lap as she scooted in close. It wasn't just incredibly intimate; it also felt far more secure.

The ground was as rough heading back up to the main road as it was going down. Nancy gripped the bike with her knees, acutely aware

this time of just what she was doing, of what was happening. Her fingers curled into Kali's shirt, her jacket, digging into the girl's belly as she leant against her. The bike shook beneath her, the engine thrumming, and if a small noise came from her, then the roar of the exhaust muffled it. Even so, she felt Kali's hand rest over hers as they crested to the top of the road and turned back towards town. Squirming, she tilted her body towards Kali until she was pressed flushed against her, her teeth sinking into her lower lip until the road smoothed out.

As they coasted onto Maple St, dipping low around the corner much the same as they did the first time, Nancy's breathing had returned to normal. Her mother's car was in the driveway and she felt her heart drop. Her mother was home so rarely these days, and the one time she was, Nancy had hoped she wouldn't be. She let Kali hop off the bike first at the end of the driveway and let her fuss with the helmet, even though she was sure she could undo it herself.

Sliding off the bike, Nancy ran a hand over her hair, trying to smooth it out. There was a tremble in her thigh, and she uncertainly drew her bag in front of her, keeping her feet close together. Keeping her back to her house, she watched Kali carefully as the other girl's eyes slid from the car, to the front window, and back to Nancy.

'My mom's home,' she said softly.

Kali nodded, understanding. Nancy licked her lips; she could still feel the press of Kali's there, the soft crackle of electricity, how very soft Kali was all over. Taking a breath, she twisted the strap of her bag.

'Do you want to come over this weekend? I'm off school until Tuesday, so- if you've got nothing else on, that is.'

There was a pause as Kali's eyes lifted to the window. Nancy glanced over her shoulder and saw her mother peering around the curtain. She waved and looked back at Kali.

'I'd like that. I don't know what Jane and Jim have planned, but I'd like that.'

Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, Nancy smiled, biting the edge

of her lip. Bashfully pressing the toe of her shoe into the ground, she nodded and tilted her head to the house. With her mother snooping from the window, she couldn't dawdle much longer. At that moment, there was a crack of thunder from the distance, the electricity that had once sparked between the two of them now filling the air. Kali grabbed the helmet and murmured her goodbye, as did Nancy. She waited long enough to see her get on the bike before she turned and hurried inside.

Her mother pried, as she was wont to do. Nancy just dodged the questions, drily remarking that it was 'Mike's girlfriend's adopted sister, aren't families fun?' before heading upstairs. And although comments were made over dinner, her father seemed far more intrigued by Kali's motorbike and what model it was than the possibility of Nancy getting hurt on it. Mike was the only one to catch her smile, the way she turned her head and focused on her beans, but even a kick under the table from him didn't get her to talk.

*

Thanksgiving passed uneventfully. Nancy was dragged to her mother's parents, then made to give her father's parents a call. She ate until she was sick, her stomach bloated. She forced herself to take part in the weird Wheeler tradition of putting up the Christmas tree on Thanksgiving night and found herself wondering about Kali, and whether she was enjoying her night with El and Hopper. Or Jane and Jim, as she called them.

Friday passed without incident, with Nancy recovering from her stomachache. Her homework and assignments lurked over her head like a shadow, but she forced herself to ignore them, at least for one day. Mike had been asked for her to help him with painting some ridiculous figurines for his *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign, saying she had a better eye for the finer details. She finally caved, and found herself crouching at the table in the basement, meticulously following the lines of a wizard's robe, a bard's cloak, a druid's skirt with a fine brush. It was actually a little relaxing, if she admitted it to herself (which she definitely wasn't, not to Mike).

He jabbered on about El, about his new high school classes, bringing up names Nancy wasn't all that familiar with. At some point, he'd

actually begun to look like a teenage boy and less like the preteen Nancy had known. Acne had begun to cluster around his jaw and temple, and in certain lights he was starting to gather a dark shadow over his upper lip. It threw her to think this may be one of the last times they would sit down here, bonding over something as simple as painting figurines.

As Saturday rolled around, her anxiety had begun to sneak back up on her again, prowling along behind and nipping at her heels. The morning was spent finishing off an essay as Holly played on her bedroom floor with her Barbies. Nancy tried to tell herself that Holly's quiet babbling didn't bother her as much as it did, even as she had to stop and draft out her sentence three times in a row. If she could spend the previous day getting her fingertips covered in paint, all for the sake of spending time with her brother, she could do the same with her sister. Even as she grit her teeth and read aloud to herself, she made herself bite her tongue around her sister.

Their parents were going out that evening. Nancy arched an eyebrow as her mother tipped her head into the room as she told her, asking if she wouldn't mind keeping an eye on her siblings. The news was a surprise to Nancy, more the idea that they were going out together and not separately, but she agreed. Maybe Thanksgiving had put some of the family spirit back into them. There was leftovers from Thanksgiving still in the freezer courtesy of their grandparents and Holly just had to be put to bed; all Nancy had to do was ensure the house wasn't burnt down.

Mike, of course, took that as an open invitation to have Lucas come around.

'You couldn't wait one damn minute, could you?' Nancy asked, her arms crossed over her chest. Their parents hadn't even turned down the end of the street; she could still see their taillights from the living room window.

'Hey, you could ask Jonathan around,' Mike replied with a shrug as he hung up the phone. He had stopped communication over the walkie-talkie some months ago, though she still sometimes saw Dustin and Will with them.

'He's got plans.' Or she assumed he did. He'd made a remark about meeting up with the mystery guy again on Wednesday afternoon.

As Mike left, though, presumably to set up for whatever plans he and Lucas had, Nancy's hand hovered over the phone. Her nails clicked over the receiver as she turned over the possibility of calling Kali. Hopper's phone number was written down somewhere, she was sure of it. But then she'd have to hope that Kali would be the one to answer, and not Hopper or El. She wasn't entirely sure what she'd say if one of them answered, she couldn't assume Kali had said she and Nancy were friendly. Hell, she didn't even know what she'd say if Kali did. Nancy had already invited her over, but it was entirely possible she wouldn't want to come. Maybe the quarry had been enough.

Turning that thought over, Nancy lowered her hand. She had told Kali when she'd be free and when she was heading back to school. She'd leave it up to her. Instead, she went to corral Holly and make sure she'd had a bath before tucking her into bed. Lucas had arrived by the time she was back downstairs, and she had just enough time to wave at him before he disappeared into the basement with Mike.

Settling down in the living room to watch *Kate & Allie*, she was seven minutes into the rerun when there was a knock on the door. Swearing under her breath, she considered yelling for Mike to get it, seeing as she'd only just sat down. It was probably one of his new friends, anyway. As a second knock came, somewhat more insistent than the first, Nancy gave a hefty sigh, deciding he wouldn't hear her even if she did yell, and dragged herself to the door.

It was Kali. She stood there, leaning back on her heel and looking to the side of the house, the helmet tucked under her arm. From the angle and direction of her head, it looked like she'd been trying to tell which light had been on in the house. Her head snapped to Nancy as the door opened, and for a brief moment the silence lingered, stretching out between them.

'Hey.'

'Jane's having a sleepover with Max,' Kali said, as way of a hello. 'I just dropped her off.'

And there, another breath. Nancy's hand slid down the door as she tucked her hair behind her ear. There was Kali, dressed all in black again, with clothes that didn't seem to match and yet still seemed effortlessly cool. Dark jeans and an oversized collared shirt, all in black, seemed so much cooler than Nancy's own pastel sweater and long skirt that went to her knees.

'Are you busy?' Kali went on, tilting her head to peer past her.

'I was going to call,' Nancy blurted out. 'I just wasn't sure what to say if Hopper or El answered.'

Kali's lips twitched until she allowed a crooked smile to cross her face. Stepping back, Nancy finally motioned for her to come inside. Her eyes kept flickering to Kali's lips and back up again. It felt like a forbidden topic. It was. A part of Nancy knew she couldn't just go around kissing Kali, but her lips suddenly felt like the focal point.

Carefully closing the door behind Kali, Nancy led her into the living room. She wondered if she should offer her something to drink or eat, but Kali was already looking over the photos on the walls and cabinets. She picked up an old photo of Nancy, where she was dressed in full costume from an old recital of *Coppélia*. The helmet was set down beside the cupboard.

'Do you still dance?'

'Not as much as I used to,' she said, stepping up behind her. 'I still take classes three times a week, but girls my age are usually there full time.'

Kali's eyes had lit up. She put the photo down and turned to her. 'Do you have to wear those toe shoes?'

'Pointe shoes?' Nancy clarified. 'Yeah. I mean, most classes start in just slippers, but- yeah, yeah, I do. I'm okay, don't think I'm some amazing prodigy. I'm never going to be dancing professionally. I enjoy it, my mom keeps enrolling me and... it provides some stability, I guess. There might be a whole other world filled with monsters, but then I can go to the studio and it's... one, two, three, four, *plié*, onto demi, arms to second. It's routine.'

As she spoke, the smile on Kali's face grew. It also softened slightly, her head tilting to the side as she listened. It made Nancy pause, her lips parting as she watched Kali rest her hip up on the cabinet.

'What?'

'When you talk about it... your whole face lights up.'

Nancy gave a weak laugh as a response, but Kali shook her head. Her hand shot out and she rested her fingers on Nancy's delicate wrist, her thumb pressing against the bony joint. Her nails brushed over her skin. She'd painted them again, this time a deep plum red. It almost looked like a crushed velvet.

'I'm really not that good. I barely even get a solo now.'

'Hey, you don't need to be good at something to enjoy it. I'd love to see you dance.'

Their eyes met. Nancy felt her breath catch in her throat as Kali's hand, warm and strong and slightly callused, slid down her wrist and to her hand. She barely dared to look, let alone move. Their fingers slowly crept together, entwining until they were clasped lightly. There was a flutter in Nancy's chest; the TV was still on, and a commercial for a secondhand car dealership was blaring. It didn't seem like the right time for another kiss, but Kali was stepping in, her other hand coming up to cup Nancy's cheek as she tilted her face down for their lips to meet.

It was slow. Careful. Nancy was acutely aware of the basement door that was still open. Glam metal was floating up, the odd few notes of a deep bass or the clash of drums. But Kali was in front of her, holding her hand and cheek and kissing her. With a soft breath, Nancy let her teeth graze of her lower lip, shivering as she felt Kali's fingernails scratch along her cheek in response.

'D'you want to sit?' Nancy asked when they parted.

Kali nodded and looked around. She took a couple of steps and stopped when she saw *Kate & Allie* on TV. She pointed at it and looked over at Nancy.

'God, you're not another soap opera fan are you? Because this won't work if you are.'

Heading halfway across the room, Nancy stopped. The question felt heavy. Loaded. Shaking her head, she let Kali walk over and switch the TV off. She moved back to the couch and flopped down, patting the cushion beside her for Nancy to sit down. Moving more cautiously, she folded her skirt underneath her as she sat, drawing her knees up to tuck her bare feet into the cushion. Kali was still wearing her chunky black boots that had distinctive yellow stitching.

'How long are you in Hawkins for?' Nancy asked quietly, resting her arm on the back of the couch.

Kali was quiet. She licked her lips, glancing away as the echo of the boys yelling in the basement echoed up.

'I'll probably be heading back up to Chicago before Christmas,' she said slowly. 'Jane wants me to come back, but it's a little weird. Sharing a house with her and Jim, being back here... and I miss my family. Mick and Funshine and...'

She drifted off. At some point she had taken Nancy's hand again, her thumb running over her knuckles. Pressing the nail of Nancy's thumb, Nancy watched as it went white then blue and back to pink. She'd always had poor circulation in her fingers.

'They could come visit, too,' Nancy suggested.

Kali laughed. 'Hawkins wouldn't know what to do with all of us. I already get stared at on my own.'

'Hey, we have a punk scene!' Nancy teased, digging her finger into Kali's thigh. 'There are five of them at school. They all sit in the parking lot, smoking and piercing their noses and playing loud music.'

'Oh, how *rebellious* of them. I'm surprised you haven't run away screaming in your perfect skirts and ballet shoes.'

'I'll have you know I sometimes sit near them with Jonathan. We sit on the hood of his car and I know, like, two of their songs.'

Kali had her head tipped back as Nancy jokingly bragged. Her fingers clutched at Nancy's sweater, pulling her closer until she had crawled on top of her lap, a knee either side of Kali's thighs. She didn't even realise what she was doing at first, laughter bubbling up as she waved her hands about.

'I'm totally a fan of Sid Vicious and- and the Misfits.'

'Totally,' Kali drawled, smirking and raising a brow.

'Oh, yeah. Totally.'

'You could totally be a punk.'

'I'm already a welcome member, sitting three car bays away from them nearly every lunch.'

Kali's hands rested on her waist, holding her in place. Nancy's skirt pooled around her, lavender on black. Letting her hands rest on Kali's shoulders, Nancy bit her lower lip. She could feel Kali gripping her sweater, tugging at the soft wool as her eyes tracked over the floral pattern that adorned the front. She had been trying to think of what she'd wear when she saw Kali again. Something more mature for a start, not the sweet pastels that still adorned most of her clothes.

There was another cry of laughter from downstairs. Nancy wondered what Mike and Lucas were doing.

'My brother's in the basement. He has a friend over.'

'Is he likely to come up?'

Tapping her finger on Kali's shoulders, she turned her head to look down the corridor as best she could. The door to the basement was open, light spilling out and reflecting on the wall, but several of the stairs squeaked. Nancy would likely hear him if he did hurry up. Now that he and Lucas were sequestered down there, too, it would be some time before either made an appearance. Shaking her head, she curled a lock of Kali's hair around her hand and let it run over the shaved side of her head.

'Good.'

Kali pulled her into a kiss. It wasn't a kiss like the others they had shared up until that point. It was deep, wanting. One of the hands that had held Nancy's waist slid to her back as Kali wrapped her arm around her, the other shooting up to cup the back of her neck, her long hair trapped underneath. Kali's mouth was hot, far hotter than her hands, which grabbed at Nancy through her clothes. Gasping against her mouth, Nancy leant in, unsure of where to put her own hands. It wasn't like making out with a boy, where Nancy could grab the front of his shirt and hold him in close. No, there were other things to take into consideration, like the feeling of Kali's bra strap under her shirt, or the way their breasts pressed together.

The thoughts spiralled around until Kali slid her hand down and grabbed the curve of Nancy's ass. The shock of it made her rock onto her knees, her body pressing flush against Kali's. Taking it as an invitation, Kali's fingers curved, grabbing at a cheek. Breathing in sharply, Nancy's hand shot down, over Kali's chest and over a breast. It felt so different, not like the relatively smooth planes of a guy's chest. No, she could feel the swell of her breast, the edge of her bra. Her thumb traced the line through the soft cotton of Kali's shirt, tracking across it as Kali leant into her hand.

The movement caused one of Kali's legs to lift up. It pressed up against Nancy, firm and strong. It was just an accidental movement, it didn't mean anything, and yet Nancy shivered and gasped, her brow pressing to the other girl's. Nancy had made out with guys before. She'd sat on their lap, fooled around; it had been an early indication of just how different Steve and Jonathan were, when one of them responded eagerly and the other had seemed more confused than anything.

Kali's response, too, to Nancy squeezing her eyes shut tighter and biting her bottom lip as she dug her fingers into her shoulder and bra as her leg pressed against her was different again. There was a chuckle, soft and breathy, as her leg lifted again. An offer. A suggestion. Nancy didn't need it; she'd already leapt at the chance. Just as she had on the bike, she tilted her hips and ground down, searching for Kali's mouth again.

Nancy wanted to believe she was more confused by her behaviour than she really was. She wanted to believe she wasn't wet right then,

shivers of arousal and want and desire shooting up from between her legs and burning low in her belly. And yet she found herself rasping for breath as Kali pressed her thigh up against her cunt, moving back and forth just a little as Nancy rutted against it. There was something so very *good* about it. She could feel each breath Kali took as her breasts lifted up against her hand, the softness of her lips parting against Nancy's own, the bite of her fingernails as one hand slipped up the back of her sweater and shirt and raked over her naked skin.

'Down.'

'Huh?'

'Down,' Nancy repeated against Kali's mouth.

With a modicum of effort, Kali shifted. Nancy's hands pushed against her, nudging her down the back of the couch until she was lying flat upon it. Squirming on top of her, Nancy followed, wriggling as their legs twisted together. Lifting her knee up, Kali continued to press it against her, Nancy writhing as she rode her thigh. Her skirt pooled around her hips, flaring out to drape over Kali's body and over the side of the couch in a ripple of fabric. Her bare legs were cold and dragged over the denim of Kali's jeans.

As though using the loose fabric as an excuse, Nancy shivered as she felt Kali's hands wander down. It wasn't the same uneasy shiver that she had felt at parties, when she'd made out with boys and felt obligated to go along because other girls did. Nor was it the nervous anticipation when she and Steve or Jonathan would fool around, and she waited for that flicker of desire to burn inside of her the same way it seemed to do for her classmates. No, she *wanted* Kali to touch her, and she wanted to touch her in kind.

A noise she barely recognised came from her as Kali's hands pulled at her skirt. The hem of her skirt dragged over her thighs and Nancy gripped as Kali's shirt in kind, pushing it up between them until her hand felt the dip of her waist, the curve of a hip, so soft and feminine and her hand fit there so well-

'Nancy?'

At the sound of Mike's voice, Nancy's head shot up. There was a creak from the basement stairs from down the hall. Nancy froze, eyes wide.

'Shit, it's my brother.'

'What?'

'Mike. Shit- '

'Nancy?' came Mike's voice again, closer this time.

Kali's hand pressed into the back of Nancy's thigh, squeezing tight. 'Hold still.'

'What?'

'Just hold still.'

Their clothes were shoved up into a mess. Kali's hair spilled around her like a messy, black and purple halo, and Nancy loathed to think of what her own looked like. There was no easy explanation for how they were laying on the couch, or why Kali's hand was disappearing up the back of her skirt. As Mike entered the archway of the living room, Nancy stilled, shivering as she felt her heart pounding in her head.

'Hi, Kali. Can we order pizza?'

He was looking somewhere far to the left of the couch, closer to the TV. He'd barely looked at the couch at all, just a cursory glance as though he expected to see them there. Nancy eyeballed him, looked at the empty space he was looking at, and back down at Kali. She was given a small shove and she finally managed to reply.

'There's leftovers in the fridge. Mom told you.'

Nancy could have sworn her voice was coming from somewhere near the TV. There was a momentary delay, like feedback on the radio.

'Ugh, I'm over turkey and pie. There's coupons on the fridge. C'mon, we'll even get extra cheese, just like you have it.'

'Fine. But you're paying.'

Mike gave a cheer and turned. She listened as his footsteps disappeared down the hall and back to the basement. She could recall what Kali had said about her ability, but it astounded Nancy to be on what was essentially the other side of it.

'Jesus,' Nancy whispered, giving another glance to the empty space she had apparently existed.

'Can we go to your room?'

Turning her head, a lock of hair falling from behind her ear and tumbling towards Kali's shoulder, she paused. After a breath she nodded, a shiver racing through her. Pushing up, she smoothed her blouse down, tugging her skirt back towards her knee. She could see on Kali's shirt where she had been grabbing at it; it was slightly twisted, pushed up over her breast, part of it tucked under her bra strap.

She felt a little dizzy heading towards the staircase. She reached the base, one foot on the bottom step, and she called to the basement, announcing she and Kali were heading upstairs. There was a pause, and then an acknowledgement from Mike. Behind her, Kali had already begun running up the stairs, snickering to herself as she grabbed Nancy by the hand. With a yelp, she let herself get dragged up, crying out with a laugh as she nearly slipped and had to haul herself up with her hand.

'Which one?' Kali asked, opening one door and sticking her head into Mike's room. 'This one?'

'No! Shh, Holly's asleep,' Nancy hissed, unable to keep the laughter from her voice. 'Here, down here- on the left- '

Kali came barrelling up behind her. Nancy had barely opened the door before she was taken into Kali's arms. They wrapped around her, pressing her into the frame, a mouth over hers. With a grunt, Nancy reached out, turning them as she managed to fling the door shut. Stepping backwards, narrowly avoiding Kali's boots, Nancy felt the foot of the bed push against the small of her spine. Slipping up it,

she squirmed backwards, the bed dipping and swaying as Kali crawled up it, pushing her down, onto her back.

Without really paying attention to what she was doing, Nancy began to pull at the buttons on Kali's shirt. It took her a second to figure out they lay differently to the shirts Steve and Jonathan wore. The buttons were backwards. With a deep V between her brows, Nancy broke the kiss to fumble with each button, cursing under her breath as she finally managed to push open the lapels of Kali's shirt. The shirt was flung off, coasting across Nancy's room like it was a black flag. One of Kali's bra straps hung down her shoulder, hanging loose.

Allowing her hands to roam over Kali's bare chest, feeling the smooth fabric of her bra under her bare hands, Nancy shivered and shut her eyes. Her name was being uttered like a prayer by Kali, just the first full syllable, again and again. Her own sweater had been pushed up, until it was shoved over her head and she was squirming out of it, letting it fall over the bed. Nancy supposed she should have been more overwhelmed by what was happening, but her blouse soon followed suit, and her lacy bra, as pink and pretty as the rest of her, was on display.

Now wasn't the time for dilemmas about her sexuality, even though a part of her thought it maybe was. No, not at all. Kali was soft. Warm. *Familiar*, in the way Steve and Jonathan and any number of other guys weren't. Kali's mouth was on her; not just on her lips but her cheek and jaw, and down over her throat. She felt her sucking at the cords in her neck, over her pulse point, and further down even more. There was a hot drag of Kali's tongue through her bra, the hint of teeth, sharp and firm over a nipple.

'Kali- '

Her name came out like a moan. It wasn't the sweet, breathy prayer that Kali herself had been offering, but a desperate noise as she arched up, her back curling off the bed. Kali had her knee between her legs again, high enough that Nancy could press down on it, rocking as her fingers grabbed at Kali's back. One hand slipped under the back of her bra, her mind still spinning over how soft and smooth everything was. There was a careful ripple of muscle, sure, but her shoulders were nowhere near as broad, the dip of her waist and small

of her back far more exaggerated.

She could feel Kali pulling at the cup of her bra. It was only lace, just a strip of fabric, and each drag of Kali's tongue could be felt. Hot and wet, and oh, she wanted it, she did. But she found her nails digging, a whine and a whimper coming from her as she pushed at Kali's shoulder.

'Can't- can't, stop- '

'Huh?'

Kali was panting. It occurred to Nancy, rather late and in a dim way, that she could feel the other girl on her thigh. Heavy but hot, even through her jeans. One of her boots had been shaken off at some point, and her socked foot was rubbing against her bare calf. Gulping down air, Nancy rested her hands on Kali's waist, just under her ribs.

She didn't want to stop. She didn't.

'Mike- I'm meant to be watching him. And Holly.'

'He's fourteen. He can keep an eye on himself.'

Nancy laughed and rolled her eyes. 'He's still learning the concept of privacy. So is Holly.'

Although Kali didn't seem entirely convinced, she did drop her hand and rest it on the bed. With a soft grunt, she teetered herself over and flopped down beside her, her arm tucked under her head. Drawing her leg up, she unlaced her single remaining boot and tossed it back off the bed.

'I've never been with a girl before,' Nancy said as she heard it drop to the carpet.

Kali studied her for a breath, then lay back down. Shifting over to face her, Nancy tucked her knees up. Her fingers brushed over the top of Kali's arm, tracing the line that her bra strap had dug into her skin.

'So you mentioned.'

'Have you?' Nancy asked, though she could already guess the answer.

'A few.'

Dancing her fingertips over Kali's shoulder, Nancy considered the answer. It didn't bother her as she supposed it might some other girls (girls who, she supposed, would have been far more surprised to find themselves in this very situation). The feeling she had instead was similar to how she'd felt when she decided to sleep with Steve. He'd been with other girls, he knew what he was doing; if anything, it had been a source of comfort. She couldn't help but mentally compare herself to other girls both Steve and Kali had slept with, and wonder how she stacked up next to them.

'And a few guys,' Kali continued after a beat.

That caught Nancy's attention. Her eyes lifted to meet the other girl's, her surprise palpable. 'Really?'

Propping her elbow up on the pillow, Kali rested her head on her hand. She began to brush Nancy's hair back with her free hand, her fingers gentle, soft. Her skin tingled wherever Kali touched, as though she could feel the electricity borne from the flowers back down at the quarry.

'Guys are fun. Girls are... softer. Guys are sexy, but girls are something else. Prettier, I guess.'

'I've had a couple of boyfriends,' Nancy said quietly. 'I mean... two serious boyfriends. That I- that we... we had sex.'

Was it possible to have both? The question turned around Nancy's mind as she ran the back of her hand down Kali's arm. Kali made it sound like that was the case, but Nancy found it a little difficult to consider. Guys had always been there. They had been the expectation, the norm. And now a brand new door had been opened up to Nancy, and she had no idea how to breathe in the new expanse offered to her.

'Was it good?'

The question threw Nancy. Cocking her head to the side, she asked

Kali to repeat herself.

'With your boyfriend. Boyfriends. Was it good?' When Nancy hesitated, she continued. 'Did you... you know. Get off?'

Get off.

The two words made Nancy's cheeks turn a deep red. Despite the two of them laying there without their shirts, despite having clutched at one another and rutted mindlessly, this felt far more exposed.

Of course Nancy had gotten off. Everybody knew Steve was a good lover. That had been part of the reason Nancy had decided on hooking up with him in the first place. The common gossip had been he did things with his mouth, which had definitely been true. Sure, she'd felt a little uncomfortable having him down *there*, but she'd been shy. She'd always been shy. At any rate, Steve knew what he was doing, and it made sense she'd gotten off.

And then there was Jonathan, who had been awkward and clumsy and he'd finally admitted he was gay, so he didn't really count. Nancy wasn't even sure if he'd even gotten off with her.

But she'd gotten off. At some point she would have.

At least she thought she had.

'Nancy? Nancy, the pizza's here- '

Jolting up, Nancy heard Mike coming up the stairs. Swearing, she lurched off the bed, nearly tripping over one of Kali's boots in the process. Stumbling, she took several staggered steps and snapped the latch into place, just as Mike rattled the handle. She pressed her back to the door, a hand covering her mouth as Kali struggled to swallow her laughter. Like she'd said, Mike was still learning the meaning of privacy.

'Ninny? You okay?'

Her bra strap had fallen down and half her breast had fallen from the lace cup. Shoving it back up, she could hear Mike on the other side of the door.

'What- what're you doing?'

Thinking fast, Nancy blurted out the first thing that popped into her head. 'Smoking.'

There was a pause from Mike while Kali fell back on the bed, a pillow shoved into her face. Biting a knuckle, Nancy snorted, somehow managing to acknowledge Mike's confused mumbling as he explained there was pizza on the table if they wanted any.

The rest of the night passed by with their shirts on and both of them keeping their hands more or less to themselves, though Nancy wasn't entirely sure how. Kali would shoot her a look while swiping sauce off her lower lip, and Nancy would feel a shot of heat deep down in her belly. There were times, too, when Nancy would find herself staring as they sat in front of the TV, where Kali was strangely fascinated by interior decorating shows, and she'd catch Nancy looking at her.

It was late when Kali dropped her lips to Nancy's ear and whispered she needed to be getting off. The two words were uttered with a smirk, to which Nancy rewarded her with an elbow to her ribs. Nancy wrote her personal phone number down on the back of Kali's hand, explaining it was a separate line to the rest of the house. She walked her out, to where her motorbike had been safely parked under the large oak next door.

'You rode El to Max's on that?'

'She likes it. Not as much as I think you do, though,' Kali replied with a smirk.

Giving Kali a playful smack, Nancy ducked her head. It was dark out here, a cold winter chill stinging the air. Looking about, she glanced back at the house. The kitchen light was on; it seemed like Lucas was about to make his leave. Turning back to Kali, deciding it was safe, she rested her cool hand on the other girl's cheek and kissed her. It was slow, Kali's hand clutching at Nancy's sweater to pull her in, until the sound of laughter from the Wheeler house caused them to break away. Lucas was heading off, walking his bike from where he'd left it by the carport.

'Drive safe. Ride safe? Get home safe,' Nancy stumbled, unsure the appropriate parlance for a motorbike. 'The roads are probably icy.'

The helmet was tossed on. Biting her lower lip, Nancy carefully nudged Kali's hands away and secured the latch for her, pulling the strap securely under her chin.

'I'll call you tomorrow. Can I see you when you get out of class on Tuesday?'

Nancy bit her lip. Normally she would head straight home, delve straight into homework. But she found herself nodding as she stepped back. If the weather wasn't too cold, she'd see if Kali could pick her up on the bike and they could head back down to the quarry. She waved as Kali rode off, the bike roaring in the quiet night, before turning and scurrying back inside.

*

Just as she promised, Kali called the following day. It wasn't the call Nancy expected, though. Kali sounded distressed, a harried tone to her voice. One of her friends, her family, was in trouble. She didn't elaborate, only that 'Dottie's shit-stain father's gone and done it again', but wouldn't explain what 'it' was and that Funshine was trying to sort it out.

Twisting the phone cord around her hand, Nancy asked if there was anything she could do or anyone she could call, and Kali sighed heavily, before saying, 'no- just keep an eye on Jane, yeah? I'll be back, I promise.'

Nancy promised, though she pointed out that Mike would likely already be doing that. She asked Kali to call when Dottie was safe, and that she hoped everything turned out okay. She also asked her to ride safe.

She tried not to miss her. Some days she succeeded. Although the memory of Kali danced around in her head, she could pretend she wasn't thinking about her when she passed kissing couples in the hallways at school, or when she and Jonathan sat by the punks at lunch and they played their thrashing music. She handed in her

geography assignment and received an A-, with the teacher praising the interesting take on the poster.

And then there were other days. She and Jonathan went down to the quarry one weekend. He wanted to photograph the freezing lake, and Nancy just wanted to get out of the house. She walked over the spot where Kali had first kissed her. She swore she could feel the crackle in the air, the kiss of petals and butterfly wings on her lips. Turning her face to the sky, she shut her eyes and held her breath.

Kali had called. She called twice a week, each time from a payphone. Dottie was safe. Nancy had spoken to her, who cautiously thanked her for her concern, sounding uneasy and nervous. She'd also spoken to Funshine, who sounded far different than what she had expected. The phone calls were always short, shorter than Nancy wanted, and she could hear each clink of the dime as it was put into the payphone until Kali had run out of coins. Nancy finally whispered one night that she missed her, and she heard Kali hold her breath, until she replied she missed Nancy, too.

There was a click of the camera shutter. Nancy opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder at Jonathan, who was lowering his camera.

'Back to taking your creeper shots?'

Jonathan snorted and rolled the dial. His shoes crunched on the gravel as he took a few steps, heading nowhere in particular.

'How's lover boy?'

She still didn't have a name for Jonathan's secret boyfriend. She knew he lived in Hawkins and didn't attend their high school; it wasn't clear if he didn't attend school at all or if he went to one of the pastoral schools. He had a job but didn't work at any of the stores in town. He had also once owned a red sweater that Jonathan had now taken upon wearing himself. It was soft and lush and smelt faintly of sandalwood. It looked somewhat familiar to Nancy, but she couldn't place where; she'd likely seen it in a store in town.

'Has your mom met him?'

Jonathan's eyes slid over to her. Raising the camera up to his eye, he turned to look over the lake. After a moment of adjusting the lens, he let the shutter click.

'She has.'

There was always a way with how Jonathan phrased things. Everything sounded like it had a double meaning. Even now, it sounded like he was either suggestion she had met his boyfriend recently, or that she had met him before they started dating.

'Can I meet him?'

Jonathan sighed heavily. Returning to the car, he grabbed the camera's case off the hood and went about putting it away. Nancy headed over, trying to read his expression. Occasionally she'd flick through some photos he'd taken, and she'd come across an expanse of naked skin. A freckled back, fingers clasped around the gear stick in a car that wasn't Jonathan's, a watch laid out on Jonathan's bedside table while out of focus was a sleeping form. They all looked like half-forgotten memories.

'What about you?' Jonathan finally asked.

'What about me?'

'You've been mooning over someone.'

'I- I'm not- I'm not mooning.'

Picking the case up, Jonathan met Nancy's eye and raised a brow. The corner of his mouth twitched into a smile as he picked the case up and went to put it in the car.

'But there is someone. Who is he?'

Nancy gaped. She tried to find a retort, something to argue, but she couldn't. She and Kali weren't dating. They had made out, they had felt each other up, and now they talked whenever Kali had the change for a payphone, but they weren't dating. And although Nancy wouldn't go so far as to say she was mooning, she was a little hung up on her. That was completely different. Tucking her hair behind

her ear, she made her way back to the car, kicking the dirt under her feet.

'It's complicated.'

'Sure it is. But if you won't tell me yours, I won't tell you mine.'

With a roll of her eyes, Nancy opened the passenger side door and flopped in. She grabbed the camera from the dashboard, where Jonathan had set it down, and set it upon her lap. If that was the game Jonathan wanted to play, then so be it.

It did make her wonder just how obvious it had been, though. Her mother had tried prying and asked who Nancy was on the phone to, while her father just seemed happy that she had a friend again that wasn't 'that Byers boy'. Although Nancy had tried explaining it was simply El's sister, that didn't seem to be enough for her mother. Mike, too, had shot Nancy a look at the dinner table one night but hadn't followed up on it.

Christmas passed, as did New Year's. Kali called shortly after 1:00AM, her speech a little slurred. Nancy was also slightly tipsy, having been allowed several glasses of champagne over the course of the evening. Kali whispered that she missed her, that she wanted her, breathlessly uttering the words. Without expecting to, Nancy's hand had slipped down the front of her jeans as she repeated the words back to Kali, shivering as she curled into herself on the bed and listened to Kali slur what she wanted to do to her as the two parties they had left for the phone call continued on outside.

*

Nancy accompanied Mike and Lucas to the library one afternoon in late January. They were working on some project for school and insisted the books in the school library weren't good enough. With a roll of her eyes, she reluctantly drove them, after Mike insisted with a '*please*, Ninny, you're just going to be moping over the phone.' The remark prickled her until Mike turned to Lucas and announced she had a boyfriend she wasn't talking about, which sent a few wolf-whistles her way as she snatched her coat and frogmarched them out.

Wandering through the aisles of books as Mike and Lucas ran off, Nancy quietly scanned the titles. Her fingers traced over the Dewey numbers on the spine of the books, scanning books about astronomy, French history, the Russian language. At some point she found herself wandering down the psychology section. Her fingertips traced books on anxiety, depression, teen mood disorders, topics that fascinated her but she didn't dare pick up. She was about to move on when her eyes rested upon a title about human sexuality. Staring at it, she quickly looked about, scanning for anyone who could see her, before pulling it out. It looked like the book Jonathan had mentioned in November.

Finding herself a quiet corner between animal husbandry and the agricultural revolution, Nancy sat down on the ground, her back to a bookshelf and pulled her knees to her chest. Flicking through it, she scanned the index, her finger tracing down the page. Under *homosexuality* was a list of items- *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexuality*- along with several other terms Nancy didn't immediately recognise, including *Kinsey scale*. Recalling the conversation she'd had with Jonathan (and Lord, it felt like a whole lifetime ago now), Nancy cocked her head and turned the pages until she hit the appropriate page.

Although she wasn't certain if this was the book Jonathan had found, the diagram presented, with a rating of 0 to 6 did ring a bell. Hunching over the book, cautiously looking up and down the aisle in case anyone encountered her, she began to read quickly. Exclusive heterosexuality through to exclusive homosexuality with a myriad of options in between. Jonathan had called himself a level five *gay-predominantly homosexual with only incidentally heterosexual interactions or desires*.

Biting her lower lip, Nancy closed the book. After carefully returning it to where she found it, she hunted down Mike and Lucas. Although she longed to make some notes about it, perhaps photocopy it if she had enough change, she didn't want to be caught reading it or having any proof of it on her hands.

The phrase churned in her mind as she drove the boys home, her fingers clutched around the wheel of her father's car. *Predominantly* and *incidentally*, whatever the rest of it meant. The same anxiety that she always felt when driving pulsed through her as she pulled into

the driveway. Lucas bounded out first, but Mike took his time, particularly when he noticed she wasn't getting out.

'You coming, Ninny?'

He'd been using that nickname frequently. The one he always gave her when he was worried.

Tapping her fingers on the wheel, she considered driving to Jonathan's. This time of day, it was bound to be quiet. He was likely to be home from work by now. A small part of her brain also told her there was the possibility his boyfriend would be over and she could find out who he was. It would take no more than fifteen minutes to drive there, twenty if she was particularly slow.

But as she looked up out the window, she saw dark clouds rolling in. Snow had been predicted for that evening on the weather forecast. It wasn't likely to hit until late, and she could be safely home by then, but the risk was still there. Tapping her fingers on the wheel, she shook her head and cut the engine. She could always call him.

'I think there's some leftover lasagne in the freeze. I'll heat it up for you two,' she said as she got out of the car.

Mike watched her; she could feel his eyes on the back of her head as she made her way inside. Something was churning inside of her, but she couldn't quite say what yet.

*

Adjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder, Nancy scurried along to keep up with Jonathan. School had let out and a light dusting of snow was on the ground. Shivering in her tights, wishing she'd worn her jeans instead, she handed Jonathan her bag and shook out her jacket.

'It was probably a good thing you didn't come by,' Jonathan said, holding the door open for her as she wrestled with her jacket. 'I had... company.'

'Company?' Nancy repeated, arching an eyebrow.

Looking over his head, Jonathan scanned who was nearby. Then, ducking his head towards Nancy, he leant in close.

'He came by.'

'Oh.'

'We were preoccupied. Busy.'

Jonathan was still looking at her. His lips had tugged upwards at the edges, his eyes widened slightly. He'd been smiling to himself all day, an almost wistful expression crossing his face when he thought no one was looking. That in itself wasn't all that unusual given the past few months. There was something different about Jonathan now, though. A blush tinged his cheeks and there was a skip in his step.

Realisation dawned and Nancy shot a hand to her mouth.

'Oh. Oh my God. *How?* I mean, what are the mechanics- '

'We figured it out,' Jonathan cut her off with a laugh.

Nancy stopped to look at him as she buttoned up her coat. He was grinning, wide and bright. Several days had passed since the weekend, and she'd been able to tell something was ready to burst inside of him. Reeling, Nancy took her bag back and tossed it over her shoulder. Giddy- that was the word to describe Jonathan. He was giddy. He kept beaming, a hand rubbing over his mouth and the back of his neck. In all the months they had been together, Jonathan had never once acted that way after they'd been intimate. It was strange to see it on him now.

'I think I want to tell him,' he divulged suddenly.

'Tell him what?'

'Oh, you know...'

A funny, strangled noise came from the back of Jonathan's throat and he shrugged, avoiding Nancy's eye. Before she could pry, Jonathan stopped in his tracks, squinting into the distance.

'What the hell?'

The lunchtime punks were standing by Jonathan's car. Before she could stop him, Jonathan had hurried off, not quite running but moving into a brisk walk. His shoulders had grown stiff, his jaw set as he went to prepare himself for whatever scuffle could be brewing.

'Jon- Jonathan, wait- '

There was no fight, though. As Nancy ran up behind, the sea of black, red and tartan parted. Kali was perched on the trunk of someone's car, a cigarette in hand. The side of her head had been freshly shaved, and a sea of black, pink and lavender locks tumbled down over her shoulder, the colours far softer than they had been months ago. Jonathan was swearing under his breath in surprise. Nancy suddenly found herself unable to remember how to move her legs.

Before she could so much as utter Kali's name, the girl had pushed herself off the car. Dropping the cigarette, she leapt over to Nancy, her hands outstretched. For a brief terrifying, wonderful moment, Nancy thought she was going to be kissed. At the last second, though, Kali changed course and drew her arms around her into a tight hug.

'God, I missed you,' Nancy whispered, her mouth to Kali's shoulder.

'Like crazy,' Kali murmured in reply. Then, stepping back, she said louder, 'I've been meeting your friends.'

'We're not- I never- '

'This is Dom. His sister's in the same class as Holly. Maggie, right?'

In the space of two minutes, Nancy was given a rushed, breathless backstory of each member of the group she and Jonathan had quietly sat near over the past year. Peering over Kali's head at Jonathan, she shrugged helplessly as he dug around for his keys. He made an excuse about needing to get to work (the liar- he didn't work Mondays) and headed to his car. Kali still had an arm around Nancy's shoulder.

Nancy could feel the punks assessing her. Here she was, pretty, pastel Nancy, in her white stockings and knee-length pale purple skirt. Giving Nancy a pull, Kali dragged her away, announcing that the two

of them had some catching up to do. Waving at the punks and at Jonathan who was watching them from his car with an amused smile, she let herself get tugged along.

'When did you arrive?' she asked once they were out of earshot.

'Last night. Me and the whole crew. We're staying just out of town, in a motel. Jane and I spent the day together. Here- '

Kali had parked her bike on the school boundary, and a few students were eyeballing it as they walked home. A helmet was suddenly thrust into her hands unexpectedly. On the side, a series of violets had been painted, splashes of yellow running down the middle. Holding it in her hands, she looked up at Kali, unsure what to say.

'Jim gave me a huge lecture last time about not wearing a helmet. So, now you have one, and I have one. And Jane. But this one's yours.'

Turning it over in her hands, Nancy found herself still at a loss. Her fingers traced over the petals as she looked back up at Kali. It had been nearly two months, and yet here she was. She was still dressed all in black, with a thick scarf tucked into her leather jacket. Dark jeans were tucked into the same chunky boots with yellow stitching, the pair she had worn the last night Nancy had seen her. Adjusting her bag, she went to put the helmet on.

'Do you want to come over?' she asked. 'Mike has hockey practice and Holly has jazz, so- so we'll have some time to catch up.'

Kali seemed like she wanted to turn it over, but Nancy already had the helmet on and had climbed onto the back of the bike. She could only imagine the sight she made, sitting in her long skirt and floral sweater, her coat tucked neatly underneath. It made Kali laugh, and she put the helmet on before joining her on the bike. She leant over to press their helmets together in lieu of a kiss, a sweet gesture that made Nancy ache for the real thing. Nestling in behind her, Nancy gave a deep sigh and folded her hands around her stomach.

Despite the months of separation, Kali still knew the way to Nancy's house. The motorbike thrummed underneath them, giving her the same delightful thrill that Nancy had experienced back in November.

Pressed in close, she could feel every breath Kali took, the way she shifted as they turned a corner and one of Nancy's hands unintentionally slipped lower to rest on the waist of her jeans.

The house was quiet when they arrived. Snow dusted the top of their helmets, as well as Nancy's shoulders and back. Kali parked inside the carport, up along the wall. Shaking her coat and helmet off, Nancy took her by the hand and pulled her inside, where it was warm.

Racing upstairs, Nancy shucked her coat and tossed it off. Kali was on her heels, giving a squawking laugh when the coat was tossed her way. She caught the bundle, the mostly melted snow landing in her hair. Chasing her, Nancy allowed herself to get caught, the two of them stumbling into her bedroom. Shutting the door behind her, Nancy fumbled and slid the lock into place, just to be on the safe side, as her bag fell down from her shoulder and onto the floor. Both their helmets rolled to the ground, knocking together.

'Oh my God, what's this?' Kali asked as the door swung shut.

Hanging up on the hook on her door was a lush, green ballet costume. The long tulle skirt hung down to the handle, the leotard covered in delicate beads. It sparkled in the afternoon sunlight, the gemstones shimmering. Kali reached out to touch it but held back, as though afraid she would damage it. Wide-eyed, she barely took her eyes off it, even as Nancy stepped out of her shoes and pulled her sweater off. Nancy had been carefully sewing the beaded pattern onto it. It was usually a job intended for mothers of the dancers, but Nancy was particular and didn't trust her mother to do the job up to a standard she expected.

'We're doing a production of Balanchine's *Jewels*. I'm performing in *Emeralds*. I wanted to be in *Diamonds* but...' She shrugged, folding her sweater and setting it down.

'It's a ballet?'

Nancy nodded.

'Can I come?'

That made her pause. Kali looked so sincere. Worrying her lower lip, a thousand reasons why Kali shouldn't or couldn't came to her, but instead she took a step to her dresser. Under a tin full of hairnets and bobby pins was a flyer about the upcoming show, folded in half and covered in sticky hairspray. Picking it up, she passed it over.

'I'm not very good. If I was, I'd be in *Diamonds* or *Rubies*- '

'I don't care, I want to see you dance.'

The utter sincerity in Kali's voice made Nancy shiver. Her eyes ran over the flyer before she folded it and slipped it into her back pocket. Nancy managed to utter the first syllable of Kali's name before she was taken into her arms, Kali's hand coming to rest on the back of her head and draw her into a kiss. One step, two, three, and Nancy fell back on the bed. Grabbing Kali, she pulled her on top, only for Kali to shift to the side, swearing to herself as she fumbled with her boots. Taking the opportunity to squirm further up, Nancy laughed as she watched her get stuck on a knot until the boot went flying off and smacked against her cupboard and rebounded off.

'Oh- oh, Jesus, I think I just scuffed your wall.'

'It's fine, Mom won't notice,' Nancy said, pulling Kali in close.

'No, seriously, I think there's some damage to the drywall.'

'Then you can tell her when she gets home and explain why.'

Grabbing the back of Kali's jacket, she pulled it off. Letting it slip over the side of the bed, she grabbed a fistful of her shirt, tugging her in until their mouths met again. The level of her demand surprised Nancy, but it thrilled her, too. She wanted Kali, *wanted* her, and it had been nearly a full two months. Gasping against her mouth, her hands slid down to Kali's hips, guiding her in close until she could press up against her.

Taking hold of the hem of her shirt, Nancy broke the kiss just long enough to pull it up and over her head. Giving her head a shake to help free it, she tossed it over the bed. Kali was still leaning against her, one hand high up on her thigh, where her skirt had started to

bunch up. Her eyes dropped as she drank in the sight of Nancy laying back on the bed, her hand running over the soft pink lace of her bra. Dimly, she realised it was likely the same one she'd been wearing the last time they were together. Shivering, Nancy let out a soft noise as she felt Kali's fingers trace over a nipple, until she pulled the delicate cup down and replaced her hand with her mouth. Her tongue was wet, hot, her teeth grazing over the delicate and sensitive skin.

'Kali- '

Her nails raked over Kali's back. Pulling at her shirt, she hitched it up, tugging at the soft wool until she had it hiked up to the other girl's armpits. With a squirm, Kali snaked out of the shirt. Her own bra was plain, a dark navy blue that complemented the deep hue of her skin. Drawing her hand up, she ran her palm over the shaved side of Kali's head, feeling the soft hair there tickle her hand. Locks of pink and black fell across her hand, while more of soft purple ran down the side of Kali's face.

'You're gorgeous.'

'Speak for yourself,' Kali replied, just as quiet as Nancy had been.

She leant back on her heels, both hands running over Nancy's breasts, across her ribs, her waist, down to her hips. Curling her fingers into the cotton, she ran one hand across her leg until her hand rested on the thick tights Nancy was wearing. Bending her knee, Nancy watched the puzzled look that took over Kali's face as she lifted her leg and traced the feeling of the muscles in her leg. Her other hand followed suit, picking up Nancy's other leg.

Curious, Kali pushed at Nancy's left leg, watching it move. She wasn't particularly flexible, at least compared to some of the other girls in her dance class. She didn't stretch as often as she should, and she still struggled to roll through a straddle split, while the other girls fell into them as naturally as a *demi-plié*. But Kali laughed with delight as she pushed Nancy's leg towards her chest, letting the other drop towards the bed.

'This is ridiculous.'

'It's really not anything. You should see some of the others. This one girl, Abigail, she can- '

'These are ridiculous,' Kali went on, cutting her off. She pinched one of the tights and let it snap back against Nancy's leg. 'What are these? Stockings?'

Kali's hands roamed over the white tights, tracing the cords in the back of Nancy's knees, the dip of her calf muscle, the bony protrusion of her ankle. Her skirt had landed in a puddle around her hips, a sea of purple that cascaded across the bed. Adjusting her bra, tugging it back over her exposed breast, her other hand continued to stroke Kali's hair, twisting the different coloured locks around her fingers. She was back. She was back and it was like no time had passed.

As Nancy stroked through Kali's hair, she felt the hands move lower. They ran over her knees and down her thighs, until her hand rested against the edge of her panties. She could feel Kali's thumb against the elastic edge, the press of her nail as she traced the lace trim. Nancy could feel her heartbeat in her head, the steady thump as she slid her hand down, over her skirt until she felt Kali's wrist. She guided her hand down, until the palm of Kali's hand lay flush against her. Shivering, Nancy's eyes fluttered shut as she felt Kali's fingers move, feeling her trace her through the layers of clothing, the heel of her hand pressing against her through the gusset of her tights.

She was wet. She could feel it the moment Kali pressed her hand against her. The bike had gotten her going and now Kali was touching her *there*, and she could feel her fingers pressing against her until they traced up to her clit. It was enough to make her gasp, her eyes growing wide as Kali did it again. Her hips rocked up the second time, rolling of their own accord as he deliberately pressed back.

'Off,' Kali whispered, her voice hoarse. She pulled at the tights again. 'Want- get these- '

Nancy was already moving. Planting her feet, she lifted her feet up as she lifted her hips off the bed and fumbled to find the zip of the skirt. As she tugged it down, Kali had already hooked her fingers around the elastic waistband of her tights. She pulled down, letting Nancy kick her legs, her skin prickling in the cool air of her bedroom. Her

skirt was flung off with everything else, Nancy realising a breath too late that her panties had been removed with her tights.

'Yours,' she said around a breath, her hands reaching for the waistband of Kali's jeans. 'You should- yours.'

Before Nancy could finish speaking, Kali had begun to fumble with her jeans. Their hands worked together, pulling and tugging at the button and fly, until Nancy roughly shoved Kali's jeans down and around her thighs. Leaning forward to kiss her, Kali began to kick them off, shoving at them until they were rather unceremoniously hanging from around an ankle. With a final yank, they were ripped off and sent flying to join her boots by the dresser. With her mouth still on Nancy, Kali began to shove her panties down, her knuckles dragging over Nancy's inner thighs until they, too, were kicked off.

She was wet. It hit Nancy, with a dull sort of realisation as she felt Kali against her thigh. They both were. The first time she had felt a guy's erection had been at a party. She'd been drinking- they both had. He was grinding against her, and his erection had been hot and hard through his jeans and pressed up against her hip. The shock of it had been enough to sober her up and make her feel somewhat queasy, in a way that had been slightly more than just a mixture of anxiety and too much alcohol.

This wasn't like that. This was the opposite. It made her shiver with anticipation, along with an amused, strange delight to know she had done that. Her own thighs were pressed together, squeezing them in close as she grabbed at Kali, pulled at her, until she was crawling forwards, their knees touching. It wasn't like being naked with a guy, either. The planes of Kali's body were familiar, the dips and curves, the natural swell of breasts and hips and belly. Her skin was soft, muscles firm, with a deep sensuality.

Following the band of her bra around to her back, she grabbed at the clasp. Kali was pulling at her own bra in turn, both hands wrapped around her back as she fumbled over it. One yank, two, and she had it undone. Both of Kali's hands were fussing with her own, her mouth sucking on the gentle underside of her neck. She stopped and looked up as her bra fell loose, her hands still working on Nancy's clasp.

'How the hell did you do that so easily?' she asked, looking down to where her bra hung by its straps around her biceps.

Laughing, Nancy rolled her eyes and reached behind herself to undo her own clasp. The lace slipped down, landing on her lap. Kali picked it up, as though intrigued by how delicate it was, her fingers tracing over the pattern. Nancy watched her for several seconds, before giving a huff and pushing it out of her hands. Climbing onto her lap, her lips pouted into small moue, she curled her fingers around Kali's colourful hair.

'I want you to touch me.'

Her voice was raw, rough. Nancy barely recognised it as her own. At the sound of it, Kali's eyes widened just a touch, her shadow smudged from where Nancy had been touching her face.

'Fuck yeah.'

It was funny to hear, that level of enthusiasm, Kali's voice seeming to have dropped a few notes. The sound of it made Nancy laugh, her head falling back, eyes shut as Kali wrapped an arm snugly around her middle. She felt her palm slid down, over the dip in her belly, across her navel, towards the thatch of hair between her legs. The first touch of her fingers made Nancy shiver, a gasp coming from the back of her throat.

She'd been touched before, but never by fingers so slim, with nails covered in polish, belonging to another girl. Kali's thumb ran over her clit as her fingers slipped over her wet folds, before pushing inside. Two fingers slipped in easily, Kali's palm pressed flat against her as her thumb rubbed small circles.

Mewling Kali's name, a shiver ran up Nancy's spine. She didn't know where to touch. There was so much skin, so many possibilities. Her hands roamed up, over Kali's belly and to her breasts. They were heavy, larger than Nancy's own, her nipples dark. It was difficult to think, to focus as Kali's fingers moved inside her, curling until she shuddered and collapsed against her. One hand dropped as Kali sucked on her neck, just under her ear. Her fingers trailed down as she felt the graze of teeth against her pulse point, a puff of hot air

against the delicate skin of her jaw and throat. Down further, over bare skin (a strange experience, as she realised Kali must shave *there*), until her fingers slipped between her legs.

This was different to Kali riding her thigh. That had been simple to coordinate. No, this was different. She could feel the heat radiating from deep within Kali, how utterly slick she was. Nancy had little idea of what she was doing. She had a vague idea of how to touch herself, of what felt good, that it felt nice to rub her clit and strange to push her fingers inside.

'Nancy- *Nan*- '

Kali had found her mouth again. Their arms were rubbing as their hands ran over each other, fingers slipping inside. Nancy didn't have a lick of an idea of what she was doing, but it didn't seem to matter. Whatever she was doing, with clumsy, uncertain fingers, her other hand pawing at Kali's left breast, it seemed to be working. The other girl was moaning, low, deep noises as she wrapped her arm tighter around Nancy's middle and guided her back.

Collapsing against the mattress, Nancy's head fell back as she felt Kali's fingers twist. It was enough to make her cry out, her hand grabbing a fistful of Kali's hair that had fallen across her shoulder. Her fingers plunged deep within the other girl, shuddering at the damp heat, how she could feel Kali squeezing around her. She couldn't keep it up, though, not when Kali bent over and took her nipple in her mouth, teeth grazing along it.

Groaning Kali's name, Nancy's hand fell away. It dropped to the bed before shooting up to her face. She could smell her. She could taste her, unintentionally, as her fingers rested on her lips. Too late to do anything about it, she let out a loud noise as Kali's fingers pressed deep within her, pressing up against a spot that Steve had once hit and Jonathan had missed entirely. It made Nancy's toes curl, her hips heaving off the bed. A twitch started in her thigh, subtle at first, until her leg was shaking and she was biting her knuckles, tasting Kali as her fingers fell into her mouth.

Her voice broke. She heard it crack and rasp as her body wracked between Kali's hand and mouth. She couldn't breathe, she was

broken. Tugging at Kali's hair, she whimpered and writhed, her heel dragging over the bed as the fingers coerced it all from her. Gasping on the air, feeling mildly broken, Nancy finally opened her eyes. Kali was studying her, her eyes dark with mischief, her teeth still grazing her nipple.

'Jesus- '

'Just Kali.'

Struggling to catch her breathe, Nancy swallowed hard. She swore she could see sparks coming from Kali. Lavender rippling through her hair, canary yellow dancing along her skin. Her hips rolled as Kali twisted her fingers again. She felt tight and swollen, each curl of the digits inside her making Nancy moan softer, until she was almost crooning, a ripple of heat washing over her. Kali's lips ran up the valley between her breasts, to the tip between her collar bones, over her throat and finally to her mouth.

The fingers pulled free. She felt them clasp her hip, holding her still as they kissed. She was still shivering, still reeling. Her foot ran over the bed, over Kali's calf, until Nancy had their legs entwined and she could feel Kali, *feel* her on top. She was lighter than what Nancy was used to, but more compact. Kali was able to laze on top of her, weight balanced neatly on her knees that were either side of Nancy's legs, one hand brushing over the loose tendrils of Nancy's hair that had spilled out over the pillow.

'You're beautiful when you get off,' Kali whispered, her lips against Nancy's jaw. 'You're beautiful anyway, but- you glow.'

'You're glowing,' Nancy whispered.

Her hand reached out to touch the radiating light that was wafting off Kali. It only appeared in her periphery. Any time she went to touch it, the light dissipated and her hand waved through empty air. Kali watched her, turning her head to watch Nancy's fingers dance through where the lights had been, before she caught her hand and kissed the back of it.

'It happens,' she whispered with a shrug of a shoulder. 'So are you.'

Nancy stared up at her, at the lights that continued to burn, but only when she wasn't focusing on them. As she lay there, skin still prickling, the odd shiver running through her, she finally began to settle down, sinking into the pillow and mattress.

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They went down to the quarry on the weekend. Allowing herself to be torn away from school work, this close to finals (exams were still three and a half months away, but she had to start studying at some point), Nancy packed them a lunch of sandwiches and homemade lemonade. Kali brought beer and a box of cookies that may have very well been stolen, given how they were crumpled when she pulled them out. Playing up a cagey, deflecting angle, Kali just shrugged and carefully packed Nancy's offerings into the seat of the bike for safekeeping.

The snow had frozen down by the lake within the quarry, but frost still clung to the struggling greenery. They lay on a blanket, bundled up in coats and warm socks and boots, a scarf wrapped around Nancy's neck and gloves on Kali's fingers. It was too cold to undress, but their lips met and knees were pressed between thighs. Kali was disappointed in Nancy's jeans, and she said as such as she groped her through them, leather upon denim.

'I thought the skirts might have bored you.'

'Are you kidding? They're a massive turn on. Easy access,' she joked, sucking underneath Nancy's ear.

But she went onto say that she liked how Nancy dressed. It wasn't Kali's style, would never be her style, but she liked it all the same. Girly and prissy, dressed in a way that was comfortable for her. Nancy didn't pretend to be someone she wasn't, when she wore her long skirts and soft sweaters, in such girly prints and styles. She liked how feminine Nancy was.

Wrapped up in one another, Nancy asked about Kali's gang. How they had come together, how their holidays had been. She listened as Kali explained how Dottie's parents had discovered she was a lesbian and decided to send her to a 'camp'. How Funshine had been wrongfully

arrested. About Axel, and his religious, zealot grandmother, and Mick who lost her home and job after refusing to sleep with her boss. People that society had tried to break, just like Kali, and they had turned into people who refused to be broken.

In turn, Nancy told her about Barb. In half-whispers and unfinished sentences, she spoke about how she missed her, how she'd tried to find justice and yet it still didn't seem like enough. As she spoke, Kali stroked her hair, tucking it behind her ear. Nancy dug her fingers, hurting with the cold, under her jacket and let herself be kissed, assured she had done all she could. She had honoured Barbara, brought some peace to her parents; now she had to do the same for herself.

She spoke of Steve and Jonathan. Her thumb ran under the golden chain she always wore, her fingers dragging the ballet slipper this way and that. It had been a gift from Barb, after she had danced her first solo at fourteen in the Spanish Variation during *The Nutcracker*. Kali curled around her and listened as she described her relationships with the two boys. It had been easier with Steve, but she'd been more honest with Jonathan.

'The sex was fine,' she said when asked, though she did feel her nose crinkle up in a way she hadn't been expecting.

'It's not just about the sex. It's how you felt in the relationship. With them as people, not just intimate partners.'

Her eyes darted to Kali. 'Well- well, Jonathan's gay so- oh, Jesus, don't tell him I told you that, I'm not to tell anyone.'

Kali's eyes had shot to her eyebrows. She made a small noise, as though suddenly understanding, and nodded. Dancing her fingers over Kali's ribcage, Nancy made a noise of her own and shrugged, as she tried to answer the rest of the question.

'Steve was... Steve was good. He was good to me and good in the bedroom. Everyone said so. And he was very, uh, committed to getting me off. It just... you know, he was fine. He was good. I had a good time,' she finally finished, satisfied with that, just like she had been in their relationship. Merely satisfied.

Kali was looking at her, though. She had that same, funny look on her face she'd given Nancy months ago, as though she had said something incredibly funny and was waiting for the other girl to catch on. Staring at her, Nancy felt her lips twitch. She gave a snort and finally asked what Nancy was looking at. Rolling onto her stomach, she rested her chin on Nancy's chest, between her breasts.

'You weren't really into him, were you?' she asked, screwing her nose up the same way Nancy had.

'I- I was into him. I was definitely... I stuck his dick in my mouth. Once,' she added, her nose twitching again. 'It... it was... an experience. It was kind of gross. I was definitely... it was definitely...'

Nancy heaved a breath. She thought she loved Steve. She swore she had, at one time. He'd been perfect in all the ways she had wanted a boyfriend to be perfect. He bought her flowers, he didn't question her refusal to drive even though she knew it prickled him. He had supported her as best she could in her grief, when he only wanted to try to pretend none of it had happened. Looking back, she couldn't fault him for that; they had attempted to cope in different ways. She couldn't move on, and Steve had desperately tried to bury his head in the sand and pretend it had never happened.

'I wanted to want him,' she finally said. 'We didn't work out, but not from lack of trying.'

'And Jonathan was gay.'

Taking a deep breath, Nancy held back a laugh. A cold wind was blowing in and she huddled closer to Kali, her leg tossing over the back of Kali's. Shaking her head, she curled up around her.

'I've dated other guys. They're the only two I slept with,' she said, before giving her a nudge. 'And you.'

'And?'

Nancy pretend to think, stinking her lower lip out. She hummed, turned it over, and shrugged.

'You were okay.'

'Okay?!' Kali squawked, smacking Nancy playfully in the arm.

'I thought it was all about the person, Kali.'

Devolving into laughter, Nancy rolled about, her head tossed back in glee in a way it hadn't been for longer than she could remember. Rolling about in delight, she let Kali pull her on top until she admitted that maybe, possibly, in some version of reality, Kali had probably gotten her off. But mostly it was just the Yamaha.

*

The snow had mostly melted by the third week of February.

Nancy had met Kali's gang, quietly standing beside her as she took in their radical hairstyles, the dark and ripped clothing. They called her Eliza Doolittle. The facial tattoos Axel bore made her dig her fingernails into her palms, uncertain what to make of the Audrey Hepburn comparison. She decided she liked Mick the most, who openly shoved him and told him to quit it. Funshine found out about the ballet concert and asked if they could go, smacking Axel on the arm before he could complain, and stated, 'those girls are totally raw, man, they could kick you on the top of your head.' Dottie just snapped her gum and said it could be fun; Nancy saw her eyeballing her out of the corner of her periphery, and it occurred to her that she was being checked out. It was flattering, though she felt better when Kali pulled her back into a tight, protective hug.

Before the end of the month, Nancy sat in her father's car, her hands at ten and two on the wheel. Adjusting the mirror, she took a deep breath, trying to ignore the way her heart hammered out a staccato beat in her birdcage chest. Suddenly achingly grateful that her father always reverse parked into the garage, despite the few extra couple of minutes it took, she put the car into drive and started off.

She took the back streets. It added an extra ten or so minutes onto her journey, particularly as she drove slowly. Strangely enough, she felt far more cautious without Mike in the car with her, filling the quiet with his chatter. She'd always stress when he spoke, constantly trying to get him to pipe down, that she had to concentrate. Turning the radio on didn't help, with the brainless announcers, making crude

jokes and laughing at inane noises. Instead, it caused her panic to spike, and she hurriedly switched it off.

She arrived at Jonathan's just before five. Taking it as no small mercy that she had arrived safe, she parked behind him and got out of the car, shaking just a little. With a trembling breath, she grabbed her bag and rounded the house. The back door would be open, and if it wasn't, she knew where the key was.

It was unlocked, as she expected. Stepping in, she didn't completely register the voices down the hall. Setting her bag down on the kitchen table, she hiked up the sleeves of her shirt and headed down to Jonathan's room, stepping over the spot on the floor where the fire had burned, even though it had long since gone. His bedroom door was mostly closed, but not shut, and she opened it without knocking. She'd never really had to knock before. The Byers lived such an open existence.

Steve was there. It occurred to her, a little too late, that he shouldn't be there on the bed like that, with Jonathan stretched out beside him. She watched his eyes grow wide as he froze, feeling strangely impassive and a little put off that Jonathan had leapt away with such fervour. She opened her mouth suddenly, hearing him tell her to leave, the words falling out, blurring out, not at all what she had planned to say when she'd been practising in the car.

'I think I'm a level five gay.'

Jonathan had been telling her to get out. At that, though, he stopped, a puzzled look on his face. 'What?'

'What's a level five gay?' Steve asked, in that same tone of voice he used whenever he felt completely and utterly out of the loop.

Jonathan was staring at her, confusion marring his usually nonplussed features. Steve was wearing a lush red sweater, and although she couldn't see it, she knew the details of his watch, with its soft and supple leather band. It was all beginning to tick over, and everything was suddenly moving far too fast for her to keep up. Jonathan had a hand on her shoulder, trying to push her free, and Steve was untucking his shirt and shoving it down around his lap and

she was just staring at the two of them, head cocked to the side.

She hadn't known. The clues had all been there, but she hadn't wanted to see them. About Jonathan. About Steve. About herself and Kali and mostly herself. Why the girls at school avoided her, with that wide radius. Why she never quite fit in at ballet, when all the girls were rolling on their tights and squirming into their leotards.

It felt good to say.

'I'm a level five gay.' She repeated it, just to be sure. A nod, decisive. A deep, shaking breath.

Steve's hair was messed up. Jonathan's shirt was crumpled at the front. The blankets on the bed were askew, and Steve was sitting with one foot perched up on the mattress, the way he would do it when he'd been getting turned on and didn't want to make a big deal about it.

He'd been so good to her. They both had. And she'd tried to be, in turn.

'What,' Steve began again, looking at them both pointedly, 'is a level five gay?'

'It's- it's just a test,' Jonathan said, waving his hand as he continued to fix Nancy with a confused stare.

'What, there's a test now?!' Steve blurted out, getting to his feet. 'Am I level five gay?'

'No, no,' Jonathan replied thoughtfully, quietly, shaking his head. 'I think you're more like a one. Maybe a two.'

'Is that a good thing? Did I pass?'

'Guys?' Nancy cried out, waving her hand.

Jonathan shrugged. 'It's not anything, it's... more of an idea.'

'Guys?' she repeated, rocking onto her toes.

They both spun to her, as though seeing her again for the first time. There was a tense moment, the air in the room heavy. Nancy's heart was pounding in her chest again, straining against her sternum and delicate ribs. Twisting her hands together, she sucked in a deep breath. Jonathan was still clearly stunned by this news, and she could see the emotions playing out on his face as he tried to piece it all together. She, too, wasn't quite sure how to comprehend what she was seeing, what she was hearing, with him and Steve and her and Kali and the thoughts puzzling in her own head about whether she had passed. She had always loved sitting a test.

With Jonathan, the clues had always been there. He had never wanted to do more than kiss. Their first time had been a rush, spurned on by booze and fear. It had been a relief to get it done, and she had a feeling it had been a last-ditch effort by him. They had tried, though. They both had.

And Steve...

Steve was Steve.

'So... does that mean you're- that you... that your boyfriend is-' Jonathan spluttered, trying to figure out the words.

'A girl?' she suggested.

Jonathan nodded and so did she. Heat rushed to her face, but she swallowed it down and took a breath.

'Are you two...'

'Boning?' Steve offered, catching on. He paused, cock his head to the side, and began to muse aloud. 'Can two girls bone? Is that the right word?'

'Dating?' Jonathan offered, instead.

Nancy took a moment to turn it over. She bit her lower lip and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. She grabbed the end of her ponytail and twisted her hand around it, mulling it all over.

'Yes,' she said slowly to Steve, whose eyebrows shot up to his

hairline. Then, to Jonathan, 'and I don't know. But I'm having a nice time figuring it all out.'

Trying not to concentrate on the way Jonathan was eyeballing her as though she'd just announced she was shaving her head and joining a Tibetan monastery, Nancy let out a slow breath. She'd said it. The words had fallen from her lips, and with them, she accepted it. Lifting her chin up and rolling her shoulders back, she nodded, letting it wash over her. This definitely hadn't been the way she'd planned to say it, but it had come out. It existed now.

Steve and Jonathan definitely hadn't factored into it, and would take a little bit more time to turn over. But if she and Kali were a thing, whatever it was, then this... this she could also accept.

'Are you two...?' she asked, although she could guess the answer.

'Boning?' Steve offered, which made Nancy cough and Jonathan blanch.

'I'm going to head home before it gets dark,' she said, rubbing the back of her neck.

'Is driving a skill you gain when you become a level five- '

'I'll explain later,' Jonathan said towards Steve, before tucking in his shirt and going to walk Nancy out. Then, to Nancy, once they were out of earshot, 'no, seriously, is your girl- female... lady... Boston wife teaching you how to drive?'

Laughing, Nancy grabbed her handbag off the table and shook her head. She didn't want Jonathan knowing the idea of sitting behind a wheel still terrified her, despite her namesake. Snatching up her father's keys, she shook her head.

'I did pass driver's ed, Jonathan.'

'And I'm still not entirely sure how,' he murmured, mostly to himself.

He escorted her to the front door. Unlocking it for her, Nancy smiled, rocked up onto her tiptoes, and kissed his cheek. Small habits died hard, and that was one that had continued to carry over. The corner

of his mouth twitched into a smile- again, small habits- and he rubbed her upper arm affectionately.

'I'm happy for you. Whatever... whatever this is,' he said, waving his hand.

'Me, too. For you. For me.'

'Level five? Really?'

Nancy shrugged a shoulder and nodded. Maybe she was closer to a four, but it didn't exactly matter. She was on that end of the scale. It was nice to be able to quantify it. Squeezing Jonathan's hand, she stepped out the door and wished him a good evening; she'd see him at school that week. Confused, he waved her off, watching as she stepped into the car and pulled out of the driveway. Driving home wasn't any easier than driving there, given the sun was beginning to set, but a weight had been lifted off her chest, one she hadn't even realised she'd been carrying for months. And, really, that was all that mattered in that moment.

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The costume was heavier than Nancy expected. They had done rehearsals in them, once all the seed beads, gemstones and crystals had been applied, but she still wasn't used to the weight. Her hair was pulled back tight and shoved into a hairpiece, so her bun matched the same size and shape as the other girls, a silvery tiara shoved deep into it. Thick, false lashes were stuck on her lids and her lips were smeared with a deep, crimson lipstick. Everything felt wrong to Nancy. The only comfort she had was sliding her feet into the tight-fitting Capezio pointe shoes, darned, the boxes scratched for extra grip, dried rosin embedded into the satin. One of the stage managers was calling for the five minute mark, and several of her fellow dancers were already lining up to go onstage.

Opening night had been the day before. She had asked her family to come the second night, after the first night jitters had left her, and, gratefully, they had listened. It didn't always happen, and Nancy found that she would dance fairly awfully for the rest of the production. Jonathan had promised he'd come the following night,

and even said he was going to coax Steve along. In addition to her family that evening, Mike was also bringing El, a thought that made her smile as she pushed to her feet, tested each shoe, and made her way to the rest of the *corps*.

'*Merde*, girls!' the stage manager whispered loudly, giving each of them a squeeze on the shoulder as she did a final headcount.

Right. *Merde*.

They made their way onstage, Nancy suddenly feeling like she was about to suffocate. She was one of the last to enter, landing stage right, another dancer right beside her. They moved silently into *croisé derrière* to an opening round of applause, the lights still dim. B-plus in Balanchine. Nancy hated that phrase. Arms in fourth, one above, one to the side. *Breathe*.

The opening tones of Fauré started and the lights raised slowly. One of the dancers in her grade, a tall, slip of a thing named Abigail, was dancing one of the solos. She had already been accepted into the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, something that made Nancy's lips twitch in amusement and slight envy. It wasn't like she wanted to be a ballerina (she was far too short, anyway), but it did rankle her a little. Just slightly. Abigail knew what she was doing with her future.

The crowd was slightly louder than standard, but it was nice. It was better than the eerily quiet crowds, who seemed reluctant to applaud, even at the end. These were the sisters (and occasional brothers) of the siblings in the audience, the children of parents who had spent hundreds and thousands of dollars on lessons, predominately for wish fulfilment. And although a noisy crowd could be distracting, it was better than hearing every cough, sniff and shuffle of shoes on the floor.

She really didn't think anything of it until the *corps* began to move, up *en pointe*, arms drawing up above their heads. There was a hoot from the audience. It was the only way to describe it- a hoot. It came somewhere from towards the back. There was a hiss, a snicker, just audible over the music, and then it the crowd became quiet again. Nancy slid her eyes over to the girl to her right (Dana, a grade below her), whose thick brows were twitching together as she tried to focus.

Right. Focus. Breathe. Move.

Several of the solos had been split up amongst the dancers, so they weren't completely focused on just a microcosm of the girls. Nancy's was roughly seven and a half minutes in, a springy number that suited her light-footed moves. She wasn't a particularly forceful dancer, but she could move quickly, and her teachers always complimented her *port de bras*. The beats ticked by, Nancy moving through each series of steps as muscle memory, mentally playing her part in her head, until she moved upstage left and waited her count.

A step, *pas de bourre*, step, *pas de bourre*, *developpé*. Right, she had this, she just had to breathe. Short, springy steps, turn, step. It was at end of the first count of eight that she heard it. Nancy could have sworn it sounded like a cheer, only people didn't cheer in ballet. They would clap politely, murmur appreciatively, and sometimes there would be a small gasp if something quite impressive happened on stage. But people definitely didn't cheer.

Only there it was again. And another hoot, similar to the first one. And, suddenly-

'Yeah, Nancy!'

Somehow she didn't freeze. She kept dancing, the wistful smile on her face hardly moving. She knew that voice, though. The strange lilt, the clipped accent. Kali.

Pirouette.

Someone whistled, loud and sharp.

Arabesque, turn stage right, *arabesque*, *arabesque*. Short, quick, sprightly, which she was good at. Unable to help herself, she grinned, trying to hide it as she turned, an arm lifting above her.

There was no point looking out into the crowd. The stage lights were blinding, the first row barely visible. The thick lashes blocked out the worst of it, but the glitter on her chest and shoulders caused to her to become dizzy if she paid too much attention.

'That's some fine ass dancing, girl!'

Nancy couldn't help it. A snort erupted from her as she started to spin, high *en pointe*, the chiffon skirt spinning around her thighs. Funshine. It had been his gruff voice. There was a murmuring of uncertain laughter from the audience, but Nancy just had to finish, had to exit stage left before she burst into laughter. In a final, brisk jump, she bounded off, a hand covering her face. Barely able to contain herself, she saw Dana eyeballing her, her brows furrowed.

'What the shit, Nancy?'

Biting her knuckle, holding back her laughter, she tried to ignore the pissed off expression on Dana's face. Turning back to the stage, her heart hammering in her chest, she smoothed out the tutu and took a breath.

'You bring a whole fan club?' asked the stage manager, her hand cover the microphone of her headset.

Nancy felt the corners of her lips twitch into a smile. 'I didn't think they'd all come.'

Sure, she had certainly hoped, but this was so much better than that. Kali had said she'd wanted to come, but she hadn't brought it up since. Nancy's heart was hammering in her chest, and if she looked down, she could just see her left breast twitch in time. It was almost hypnotic, the muscle underneath moving with her heart, her breath assisting it along. Closing her eyes, she breathed through her nose, out through her mouth, and stretched out her arms and back to stop herself from getting cold.

As the finale of *Emeralds* began to swell, Nancy swanned back onstage. A part of her still wished she'd been cast in *Diamonds*, with their elegant, snowflake-styled costumes and regal, snow queen-like make up, frosty and cool. There was something incredibly magical about this though, the role of a woodland nymph, a dryad in encrusted gems, as she and her fellow corps members joined hands and moved in a snaking chain around the stage. Maybe her new friends weren't the most respectful of ballet traditions, but it didn't matter. They saw her, and that brought her a greater thrill than any acceptance into any ballet school would.

She had to stay backstage during the intermissions, which was painful, knowing there were people out there waiting for her. Sitting backstage in a robe, carefully protecting the delicate costume from any kind of damage, Nancy sipped a dry ginger ale through a straw. Watching her fellow dancers float by, some of them scowling at her for having brought a bunch of assholes, others sighing in jealousy and wishing their own friends were that excited, Nancy watched the myriad of girls. Soft limbs, long necks, graceful lines. The slightest swell where breasts were wrapped under leotards and carefully hidden underwear. Smooth legs, delicate skirts, done up for only a few minutes on stage.

None of them were done up as beautifully as Kali could be. None of them put on a show as much as Nancy had. Smirking around her straw, she bounced her feet as she perched on the edge of the stool, tapping her toe boxes on the ground. Her performance hadn't been neat, it hadn't been as precise as it had been in rehearsal, but it was the best it had ever been. It had been for Kali.

'Your friends were noisy.'

It was one of the dressers. Nancy looked up, the straw hanging from her lip. Abigail's mother. Pushy, red-faced, and with a need to prove herself via her daughter. Although her own mother left a lot to be desired, Nancy had always appreciated that she avoided coming backstage, and instead stuck to sitting in the crowd.

'Mm-hmm.'

'They could have thrown one of you off.'

'Mm.'

'Someone could have been hurt.'

With a sigh, Nancy dropped her straw into the empty bottle. It bounced, spinning around the lip, before slowing to a stop. Standing, rolling through her shoes, she set it down on the table beside her and knotted the sash around the robe.

'I'll tell them to cheer louder next time, then.'

There wouldn't be a next time. This was Nancy's last hurrah, along with the rest of the girls whose ballet studies ended at the end of the school term. Stretching out her legs and arms, Nancy waited patiently, smiling to herself as she neatened herself up.

At curtain call, she entered with the other *Emeralds*. There was a roar from the back, a thunderous applause. Unable to help herself, Nancy began to snicker, her shoulders shaking as she held hands with the other girls and went to curtsy. Beside her, Dana rolled her eyes, muttering that Nancy was a show-hog. It washed over her, like oil on water.

She changed into a loose dress and sandals once they were given permission from the stage managers. Her hair was still wrapped up tight, the tiara removed and replaced with a thick scrunchie to hide the indents in her bun. The entrance to the theatre was packed as she left the dressing room, throngs of people standing shoulder to shoulder. Pressing past them, she lifted her chin, trying to make heads or tails of everyone. Without expecting it, she was suddenly wrapped up in someone's arms from behind. Leather, smoke and hairspray wafted over her as she fell back, crumpling into Kali's arms.

'There she is!'

A small cry of delight came from Nancy. There was a quick, barely-there press of lips to the back of her exposed neck, and she laughed, squirming in the strong arms that wrapped around her. Shivering, she bit her lip and looked around, wondering if anyone saw.

'You guys nearly got me into such shit!' she gushed, holding onto Kali's forearms.

'You were wonderful. This- this is amazing,' Funshine started, before being interrupted by Kali.

'Go get your own ballerina girlfriend, this one's mine.'

Girlfriend.

The word rang in Nancy's head, the air from her lungs suddenly ripped from her. Girlfriend. It was such a heavy word, and Kali had

just applied it to her. Nancy Wheeler, girlfriend of Kali Prasad. Similar titles had been bestowed upon her before- Steve, Jonathan, just among two of them- but this was different. This was Kali. This was another girl, who had wrapped Nancy up in her arms, and brought along a posse of punks to a ballet performance, and she had just called Nancy her girlfriend.

'Nancy! Nancy- she's over here, Mom- '

Mike. He was pushing through the throng of people, despite the small perimeter that had been granted to the cohort Nancy had suddenly found herself in. El was following along behind, and her eyes lit up when she saw Kali. Letting her go (letting her girlfriend go, Nancy's mind supplied), she stepped out to let the sisters reunite. Approaching Mike, she couldn't hide her beaming smile.

'You looked like you were having fun.'

It was a compliment. Many people wouldn't take it that way, but Nancy could hear it. Her joy had been visible, and that's all she had wanted. Nodding, she tucked back a stiff strand of hair that had come free from her tight bun.

'I was.'

Her parents approached. Her mother had a tight, fixed smile on her face as she eyed Nancy's new friends, clearly unable to quite process this. Behind her, Nancy's father was holding Holly's hand as he pointed out all the dancers around them. Taking a deep breath, Nancy allowed herself to get pulled into her mother's arms. She didn't smell of alcohol. Instead, she smelled like Giorgio, a perfume that rankled Nancy's nose but smelled more like her mother than cask wine.

'Nancy. These are your... friends?'

She heard her mother swallow around the word, a strangled sound that Nancy privately delighted in. Nodding, although she still wasn't sure if she'd call the rest of Kali's gang her friends just yet, she turned to make introductions. It was too late, though. Holly had spotted Dottie's curly hair and was making an attempt to touch the scarf that

hung down her back. To Nancy's surprise, Dottie crouched down and let Holly stick her hands in. She even smiled when the young girl squealed and announced she liked it.

'Hey, you're the one with the Yamaha, huh?'

And there was her father, snapping his fingers and looking at Kali. The girl stumbled a moment, eyeing both Nancy and El, who she had under her arm, before she nodded. Nancy's father launched into a rambling monologue about his own youth, and the motorbike he had owned while at college. Mike and Nancy shared a look, both rolling their eyes, as they took a step back to rest against the nearby wall.

'Did El enjoy herself?' she asked, keeping an eye on her family and friends.

'She did.' There was a long pause as Mike tugged at a hangnail, until Nancy batted his hands apart, refusing to let him pick at it. 'I did, too.'

'Holly will be likely dancing next year,' she said, sensing there was something else Mike wanted to say but couldn't yet find the words.

'Yeah, but... jazz?' Rolling his eyes, he made a scoffing noise and kicked his heel against the wall.

Letting go of Mike's hand, she let their arms bump together. While her mother seemed a little perturbed by Nancy's new choice in friends, her father seemed quite tickled by it. She couldn't tell if Axel was laughing with him or at him, but her father didn't appear to mind either way.

As the crowd began to dwindle, her mother announced they needed to get El home. Nancy had begun to pick bits of glitter out of her hair, and she screwed her nose up. She wanted to shower. She felt itchy all over. Making a passing remark about how she just wanted to go home, Kali spoke up.

'We can take you home. If that's okay, Mr Wheeler,' she said, fixing the man with a well-intentioned look.

'Oh, I don't know, Ted,' her mother started, managing to wrangle

Holly away from Mick, who had been receiving the same treatment as Dottie.

Nancy heard her father say her mother's name. She kept her head down, though her eyes darted up to Kali as a smile twitched on her lips. She was permitted to leave with them. Giving each of her parents a quick hug and deliberately leaving a bright red lipstick stain on Mike's brow, Nancy was whisked away to climb into the back of a rattling van.

The house was quiet when she was dropped off. Kali got out with her, waving at her friends as they drove off. The porch light was on, and someone had left the kitchen light on, too. It was still brisk for March, and Nancy shivered as she fumbled with her keys to get inside. Kali was carrying her bag, filled with her pointe shoes, extra hair pins and a set of tights that didn't have a run in them.

As the door shut behind them, Kali pulled her into a kiss. Sighing into it, Nancy let herself fall into the open arms, the bag hitting the ground as she pushed it from Kali's hands.

'I do need to shower,' she whispered as they broke apart. Her thumb swiped over the smudged lipstick on Kali's mouth.

'I know. But I needed to do that.'

Pulling away, Nancy ducked her head as she grabbed her bag. Telling Kali to make herself comfortable, she went upstairs to begin the process of scrubbing off. The layers of an imperfect, superficial ballerina had to be stripped away. The hair pins had to be slid out, the hairnet untangled. The make up had to be wiped away, thick layers of it smearing over her forehead and cheeks, her jaw becoming a mess of red and pink. The glitter was stubborn and wouldn't be so easily removed.

A hot shower helped her feel more like Nancy Wheeler and less like Emeralds Dancer #5. She washed her hair twice; once for the glitter, once for the hairspray. It still felt crunchy and glitter clung to her shoulders and breasts when she stepped out, but it would be tolerable for the night. She had one more show, at any rate. Her muscles ached, one of her toes was bleeding, and her neck twinged when she

turned to the left.

The show had been wonderful.

She left the bathroom in her oversized bathrobe. Her hair was still dripping down her back, but there was no point in trying to fix it. It'd be sprayed stiff tomorrow, another hairpiece tossed on top of it. Adjusting the belt, she padded to her bedroom, only partially surprised to find Kali already in there, sitting cross-legged on her bed. A plate of toast was beside her, lightly buttered, along with a hairbrush and a glass of water.

'I thought you might be hungry. I don't know what you're meant to eat after something like that, but...' She lifted the plate up.

Shutting the door behind her, mostly out of habit, she slid the lock into place. Approaching Kali, she took the plate. With a firm hand, Kali sat her down on the ground. As Nancy began to pick at the toast, pulling the crusts off it, Kali began to brush her hair. She was firm but not rough, moving like a hairdresser who knew precisely what she was doing.

'You were the best.'

Nancy snorted, rudely. 'You're being kind.'

'I thought you were the best,' Kali clarified, taking no offence. 'You were beautiful. All the other girls were stiff, trying too hard to be elegant and graceful, but you were beautiful. Everybody thought so. You were glowing.'

'You guys were making so much noise I thought you were going to get evicted.'

Kali ran her thumb down the side of Nancy's head, brushing the rest of her hair over. Taking a small section, she began to braid it, her fingers making quick work of it. There was the occasional pull, a small tug, but it didn't hurt. It was actually quite relaxing, and Nancy found her eyes closing as she nibbled on the small meal.

'Thank you for coming,' she whispered, tipping her head back.

A hand rested on her forehead, pushing the loose hair off her face. Kali bent over, a soft smile on her face. She kissed her, as gently and carefully as she had the first time, down at the quarry.

'I told you I wanted to go. And Mike told me that El wanted to go. We all wanted to see you dance.'

'Funshine sounded like he had fun,' Nancy remarked, still a little bewildered by that concept. The glass of water was resting on her knee.

'His little girl used to dance,' she said, tying an elastic to the end of one the braids, before beginning on another section. 'Before she died.'

There was a story there. Nancy could sense it. She didn't pry, though, deciding it would be told when the time was right.

She finished the toast, licking the buttery crumbs off her fingertips. Soon enough, Kali, too, had finished with her hair. When she stood to put the plate and glass on her dresser, she glanced at her reflection. A handful of small, delicate braids ran across her head, knitted tightly to her scalp. She could see her pale skin underneath. She wouldn't be able to keep it in for the performance the following afternoon, unfortunately. Running her hand over it, watching as the rest of her hair tumbled over her shoulder in a series of thick curls, she looked back over at Kali with a soft smile.

The bathrobe was pushed from her body when she returned to the bed. Naked underneath, the soft wool having dried most of her skin, Nancy crawled on top of her Kali. The other girl's clothes were discarded quickly, Nancy unbuttoning her blouse, her mouth moving across her bare chest, across her bra and down her belly. Her skin was supple, smooth, and she could feel her stomach twitching as she feathered kisses over her navel and hips. The two of them worked to get Kali's jeans off, snug around her hips.

Nancy's mouth moved over Kali's thighs, her hands sliding over her body. Across the soft cotton over her panties, up to the mismatched bra. She wasn't entirely aware of what she was doing, only that she wanted to touch her, to feel her quiver under her mouth. She lifted up when Kali wriggled out of her panties, her bra pulled off and

tossed away, getting lost behind her bedside table. Slipping her hands up, Nancy took a breath, her chin momentarily resting on the soft curve of Kali's belly.

Bowing her head, she shut her eyes, letting Kali's body guide her. Nancy had never particularly enjoyed this act done to her. She felt exposed, raw, on display. And yet here she was, pressing her mouth between Kali's legs, her tongue swiping in to taste her. Hot, soft, wet. Opening her mouth against Kali's cunt, Nancy rested a hand atop her belly, her fingers on other hand sliding in against her tongue.

It was weird. Not bad, but different. One of Kali's legs was tossed over her shoulders and Nancy could feel her foot running down her back, across the notches of her spine and the sharp crest of a shoulder blade. A hand was threaded through her hair, holding onto the locks that were loose and damp, curling as they dried in the humidity of her bedroom. She was salty and smooth, and Nancy could feel each flicker and quiver of her body as her tongue ran over her. Her fingers twisted as she tried to recreate what Kali had done to her, trying to find that spot deep inside that had made her throb and burn with desire. Nancy didn't quite know what she was looking for, or if she'd even find it, but Kali was rocking underneath her, heaving her hips up in a way that suggested she was on the right path

Kali was saying her name. No, not just saying it. She was moaning it, breathlessly, disbelievingly. Nancy was under no pretences. She didn't think she was that good, nor that innately skilled. But Kali gasped the first syllable of her name, rolling it over her tongue like a prayer as she lifted her hips and let her head fall back against the pillow. Kali's hair spilled out around her like strands of wisteria, running down Nancy's pillow case and over the mattress.

Turning her head, she grazed her teeth over Kali's inner thigh. That was something she had particularly enjoyed, in the few times she had let Steve do this to her. Her fingers curled within Kali as she tried to recreate what had been done to her; in turn, Kali moaned, her own hand slipping down to work alongside Nancy's. The fingers pressed together against her clit, Kali's nails scratching over Nancy's knuckles. There was a pull on her hair, a sharp tug, and her mouth was guided back between Kali's legs.

'Nan- Nan- '

Kali seemed to shimmer. The purple and pink tones in her hair appeared to warp and glitter over the pillowcase, her breasts heaving as she sucked in air. Mouth slick and eyes fixed on Kali, Nancy watched, transfixed as the air around her rippled. A wash of iridescent colours ran out from her, bleeding across the bedclothes as she clenched around Nancy's fingers, her thighs twitching and pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

Laying between Kali's legs, Nancy's ankles crossed, she took a breath. Kali was still gulping down air, even as she groped about and found Nancy's wrist with her own damp fingers. With a few slurred words of encouragement, she was tugged up. Flopping onto her back with a laugh, she opened her arms up to Kali and let her fall into them. A thigh was pressed between her legs, firm and steady and ready for Nancy to grind down on.

She came with Kali's mouth on her throat, a hand in her hair, and her own nails biting into Kali's back. Nancy's body twitched and she sighed, feet dragging over the sheets as she kicked the blankets off. Clutching as Kali, she gave a strangled hiccupping noise and held her close.

Butterflies floated above the bed. She watched them, through hazy, half-closed lashes, until they each winked out like starlight.

*

Kali was dressed in an oversized t-shirt that Nancy had pulled out from the wash basket and a pair of panties. Running her hand through the purple locks that cascaded over her shoulder, Nancy gave a soft sigh. She was still shivering. She'd heard her parents come home, called goodnight to them from the top of the stairwell, and had hurried back to bed. That had been a half hour ago.

'Why don't you drive?'

The question seemed to come out of nowhere. Rubbing her cheek on the back of her hand, Nancy pulled the blankets up a little higher, feeling her nightgown hike up to her knees.

'I drive. A little. I have my license.'

'But you don't like to.'

Nancy rubbed her cheek again. Shifting a little, she lowered her eyes and went back to brushing Kali's arm. Up and down, nails running over a small island of freckles, a scar high up on her bicep. There were far more than she'd expected, a litter of them that ran up to tuck behind her shoulder. A series of goosebumps appeared on Kali's skin.

'When I was about fourteen, just at the start of freshman year, I was home with Mike. He would have been about ten or so. Mom was out with Holly, I can't remember where. I was making lunch for the two of us. Mike and I.'

She coughed, sniffed, and drew her hand down. The goosebumps followed and there was a shiver of electricity again in her fingertips.

'I had my back turned for thirty seconds. Maybe less. He wanted to be helpful. I'd been boiling water and it was on the stove and he went to grab it and...'

A heaving sigh expelled from her lungs. There had been an awful, still moment when Nancy had been stuck to the ground. Her feet had grown roots. She'd known what had happened before she'd turned around, before Mike had even begun to wail. It had been quiet; that had been the eerie thing. The saucepan had cluttered to the ground, water had sloshed everywhere, and in an instant all the air had been sucked from the room. Mike didn't even seem to realise the enormity of what had happened until Nancy had turned around and seen his wet clothes.

'Mom had left her keys behind and I panicked. I threw cold water on him, soaked a towel for him to hold onto and got him in the back seat of her car. I could barely reach the pedals. I got as far as the Hendersons.'

Closing her eyes, Nancy held a breath. Kali's fingers danced down her face. Electricity, as soft as petals and as delicate as butterfly kisses.

The silence had been hard, but hearing Mike cry in the back seat had been harder. The heaving sobs that became increasingly guttural as she'd become lost, unable to remember when their mother had gone or where they could go. She knew the way into town, but the doctor's clinic was in the opposite direction. She'd passed the Sinclair household twice, the Hollands once, but no cars had been in either of their driveways. She hadn't noticed any, at any rate, and the more time that went by, the more panicked she had been. The Hendersons had been a last-ditch effort, and she'd been in hysterics by then. All up, it had probably been less than ten minutes. Maybe even closer to five.

She hated driving when there was noise.

'He still has scars on his thighs. Some on his stomach. A few kids at school found out, real shitbags. They called him a boiling frog. The nickname got shortened to just frog and... and somehow it stuck. Some of them still call him it.'

With a shudder, Nancy finally dared to open her eyes. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away, refusing to let them fall. Kali was watching her, concern marring her features.

'Nancy- '

'Don't tell me it wasn't my fault. Don't... don't tell me I couldn't have stopped it, or that it was an accident- or... or that I did the right thing, or any of that bullshit. Please. Because I've been told that, again and again, and- and it happened. He got burnt, on my watch. On me.'

Silence descended. Kali tucked some of Nancy's hair behind her ear and very lightly kissed her on the tip of her nose.

'Thank you for telling me.'

Somehow, that was all Nancy needed to hear.

*

Holly was playing with the strange *Gummi Bear* toys again. She had gone off them for a month or two and now they were her favourite

obsession again. They were off on an adventure with a collection of Barbie dolls that had been scattered around Nancy's bedroom. It seemed to be some peculiar, *Wizard Of Oz*-styled adventure that incorporated space travel. Holly had laid down pieces of card that she had covered with glue and glitter, and pieces of it had sprinkled across the carpet. The last of the seed beads from her ballet costume were being used as shooting stars. Nancy wasn't entirely following her game, as she sat across the floor, flicking through the acceptance letters from various colleges across the country. They ranged from one up in Washington state all the way down to Texas and then east to Maine. She knew at some point she must have applied for them. It had seemed dreadfully important at the time, but now she struggled to even remember the essays she'd written, the courses she had applied for.

School was finishing soon. Her final exams were tearing down upon her, but Nancy only felt nervous in a distant, hazy sort of way. She wanted to be nervous. She wanted her anxiety to come crashing down upon her, the way it did whenever small things became huge, when it had to be utterly perfect, down to the type of glitter or confetti to use. Setting down the various acceptance letters, trying to remember which one her mother had insisted she write back to, Nancy slumped against the chest that sat under her window. Holly was using her legs as hills for her dolls to climb upon, their little plastic feet dancing over her ankles and shins.

'Ninny?'

Looking up, Nancy was slightly surprised to find Mike filling her doorway. He'd shot up again, sometime between February and April. He was nearly as tall as their father now, and would no doubt be towering over him by the time he was done growing. It appeared he actually had their grandfather's genes, who was even taller than their father, a fact that Nancy still sulked over.

'I was going to the store later. Was thinking of making a banana split tonight. D'you want anything?'

'I can drive you.'

The offer spilled from her mouth before she could stop it. Even Holly

paused and looked up, digesting that information with all the capabilities a first grader could. Mike paused, tapping his finger on the door frame as he turned it over.

'Uh. Yeah. That- that would be nice. Really?'

Nancy shrugged and set the letters down. Dawdling in the doorway, Mike finally stepped in, carefully minding Holly's strategically placed dolls. Sliding down the wall to sit beside her, he picked up one of the letters and turned it over. She'd kept all of them, mostly because her mother wanted her to. She supposed she should feel proud; she had a choice of where she wanted to go.

'You're going to Emory, right?'

'Mm-hmm. Guess so.'

'Mom still worked up about you doing nursing?'

'I think so. I've avoided talking about it with her.'

Mike picked up another one of the acceptance letters. Northwestern. Boston. Tulsa, Ann Arbor. There were rejection letters, too, a bundle that Nancy had bound with an elastic band and kept at the bottom of her drawer, as some kind of penance for even thinking of applying to them. Somehow, it was the pile Mike was handling that filled her with more dread.

'You sound enthused.'

'I'm vibrating with exhilaration.'

'Would you rather be dancing at Pittsburgh?'

The corner of Nancy's lip curled into a smile. She slid her eyes over to Mike as Holly nudged one of her legs up to make a tunnel under her knees. Mike set the letters down, folding each of them neatly.

'What would you rather be doing?'

That had been the question Nancy had been turning over in her head, time and time again. All she knew was that she wanted to hop on the

back of Kali's bike when she tore out of Hawkins at the end of the school year, once El was done with ninth grade, and escape the suffocating, small town. College was somewhere on her horizon for sure, but she didn't know if she wanted it to be that coming September.

'I have no idea,' she admitted. 'I liked the idea of journalism. Or I could train those rescue dogs, you know the ones that dig through rubble? I'd like that.'

'I don't think you need to go to college for that.'

'I don't want to.'

Mike levelled her with a look. He tilted his head slightly, letting the words sit. Looking back down at the letters he had folded in a pile, he made a small noise and rested his hands on his lap. On all fours, Holly began to lead the toes to the other side of the room, where she had made several steps out of books Nancy had laying around.

'Mom would be pissed.'

'She'd be pissed about a lot of my recent decisions.'

Stretching her legs back out, she tried not to flinch as Mike scooted in closer. His head fell against her shoulder, heavy, with tufts of curls tickling her cheek. With a heavy sigh, she drew her arm up around his shoulders that seemed to have doubled in size over the past year, and pulled him in close. Mike's hands were clasped against his stomach, pulling at his shirt as he watched Holly play.

'You haven't hung out with Dustin and Will in a while, have you?'

Mike tapped his fingers over his jeans. He took a breath, held it, and ran his thumb over one of the spots that Nancy knew was scarred. Dustin had nursed his head in the back seat that horrific afternoon, telling him to 'calm down, buddy, it's all good'.

'They've gotten into drama club. It's a different scene to AV. We still hang out at school, but...'

They were drifting. Nancy wasn't sure what to say about that. They

were getting older, and it wasn't necessarily a bad thing for them to grow up, move on. But their friendships had been forged in fire.

'Don't let them go, Mike. All four of you were close for so long.'

'I don't want *you* to go.'

The words stung.

'Hey, I'm not going anywhere just yet,' Nancy joked, nudging him with her arm.

'I'll miss you.'

Nancy grew quiet. Turning her head, she pressed her lips to Mike's hairline, just firm enough to make him squirm and groan, swiping his hands over his head the way he had done as a child. Laughing, Nancy bowed her head and flexed her feet up to the ceiling, feeling a strong stretch down the back of her calves. Drawing her arm back in, she clasped her hands together. There was a hangnail on her thumb, and she began to pick at it, until Mike pulled at her wrist and forced her hands apart.

'I've been seeing Kali.'

The admission spilled from her, much the same way it had when she revealed she didn't know to do about college. Surprisingly, though, Mike didn't give her the same shocked look.

'I know.' He swallowed hard, pursed his lips tight, and kept his eyes down. 'I saw you two, when Lucas came over that one time. You two were outside and- and I saw you two kissing. I managed to distract him.'

Nancy was still stuck over the first two words. A shiver had started down her spine, but she managed to remain still. Holly was babbling, and her little voice sounded like wind over the ocean. Distant. Impossible.

'You didn't say anything,' Nancy whispered, reeling a little with it.

'You seemed happy. You are happy. I don't get it, but... I just want

you to be happy, Ninny.' Biting his thumbnail, Mike drew a knee up to his chest. 'And I think you should take some time off before you go to college, if you can. I want you stay here, but if you want to go off with Kali, then you should do that. I'll just miss you.'

Mike had known. Studying his profile, Nancy held her breath. He wiped his face on his shoulder, eyes on his lap. Holly was talking to herself, one of the dolls having been declared the queen of Gummi-Glen.

She would miss this. She would miss Mike and Holly. She would miss this room.

She would miss Hawkins as a concept, if not as a place.

Mike was getting older, and so was Holly. They were growing. And at some point, so had she. Sentimentality had always been a difficult concept for her. Nancy had always lived in the past, stuck in a world of had-beens and could-have-beens. She could stay there. Wait and let it fester, as she had so many times before. She didn't want that to be her, though. She didn't want to be that girl who refused to move on, who kept living there, one foot in the future and one stuck firmly in the past.

She didn't know if Kali would want her to come. She didn't even know if she wanted to go. But she didn't want to stay in Hawkins and see the people around her grow and change when she couldn't do the very same thing herself.

Smacking her hand just above Mike's knee, she pushed herself up.

'C'mon. Let's go to the store. Holly, do you want a banana split? Mike's making them.'

Holly wrinkled her nose, never having been keen on bananas, but she pushed up to her feet, still holding the new queen of Gummi-Glen. Taking her hand, Nancy reached out for Mike, heaving him up, too. She was always keen to go on an adventure with her older siblings.

'Did you want to invite El over tonight?' she asked as they headed out.

'Did you want to invite Kali?' Mike replied.

He looked smug. It was a terrible look on him. Narrowing her eyes, she gave him a firm, playful push between his shoulders and nudged him out of the room. It wasn't nerves that ran through her, but an excited agitation. A thrilling apprehension. It was new and strange, and she didn't quite know how to let it sit within her. But maybe she didn't need to know how, and to just accept that it was there. She didn't need to have an answer for everything. That, at least, was the answer she had for now.